真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝

天地無用！GXP 6

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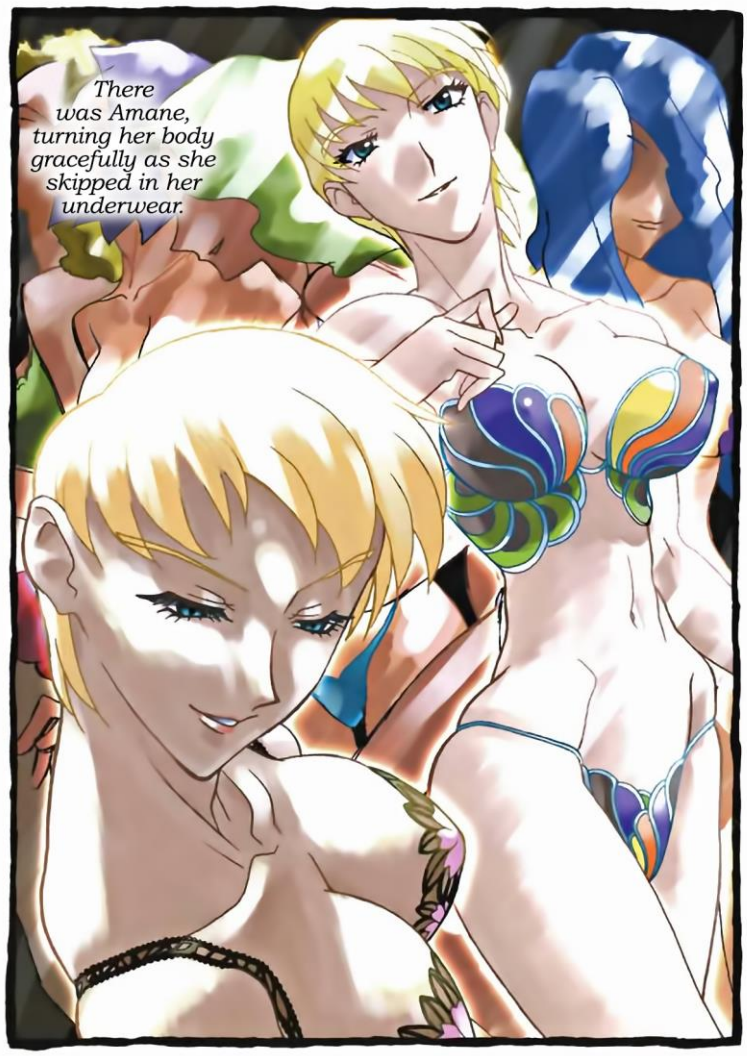
ファンタジア文庫

天地無用! GXP 6
TENCHI MUYO!

Erma moved away
and pretended to work as
she watched the woman.
She had blonde hair,
brown skin, and blue eyes.
She was wearing optical
camouflage similar to Kiriko's
when she fought Tarant's pirates.
Her hair was shorter than Amane's,
and just from her gestures,
it was apparent that her whole
body was like a mass of springs.


There was Amane, turning her body gracefully as she skipped in her underwear.

A monitor started up in front of Seina, and an underwear commercial started playing.
"What? ...Huh, Amane... san?"

"Me too... living with you and the others was fun. If possible... I wanted things to stay like that forever..."
Large tears were falling from Ryoko's face.
"Even for me... this was the place where I could live as myself."

True Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Gaiden

Tenchi Muyo! GXP6

Masaki Kajishima

Table of Contents

Chapter One: First Experience	6
Chapter Two: Commemoration, Consolation, and Hardship	18
Chapter Three: Melancholy	53
Chapter Four: First Paycheck	70
Chapter Five: A Mix of Joy and Sorrow	96
Chapter Six: Prologue: Part One - The Wall of Fools	139
Chapter Seven: Prologue: Part Two - Run, Run Away	149
Afterword	154
Afterword Theatre Part 3	154

Illustrations

Cover - Ryoko, Seina, and Erma	Cover
Pinup 1 - Erma, Mikami, Tennyo	2
Pinup 2 - Amane and Seina	3
Pinup 3 - Ryoko and Seina	4
Karen and Gyokuren	12
Pinup 1 - Erma, Mikami, Tennyo	22
GXP Police Car	25
Mikami and Seina	41
Ryoko and her First Officer	54
Ryoko Balta	70
Mikami and Airi	85
Seina and the Girls	96
Pinup 2 - Amane and Seina	99
Amane and Kiriko	110
Seina shopping	125
Pinup 3 - Ryoko and Seina	131
Minaho and Seto	147

Chapter One: First Experience

Space—the last frontier left for humanity to explore.

Even at Galaxy Academy, where science far surpassed Earth's and space had become an everyday living environment, this remained unchanged. Space was that vast and boundless; even within the Galactic Federation's sphere, many habitable planets remained unexplored. Venturing beyond the galaxy was something only academic research vessels or eccentric adventurers would attempt.

Even a single galaxy possessed enough capacity to easily absorb humanity's insatiable greed and thirst for knowledge.

(Amazing…)

Seated in the captain's chair aboard the “Kamidake” as it raced through space, Seina reveled in the feeling of liberation.

It was difficult to truly grasp speed in space. It felt like driving along an endless, flat road, staring only at the horizon. Yet, from the command chair with its sweeping view, Seina felt something akin to liberation—similar to the explosive expansion of his range of action when he first got a bicycle. It was the freedom to move wherever he pleased, not confined to the regular routes of trains or buses. For Seina, who had only a handful of experiences since ascending into space, leaving a planet for space—no, even atmospheric reentry—was an exciting event.

The Kamidake possessed the capability for intergalactic travel once connected to the necessary units for living and maintenance. Of course, as a member of the GP, such selfish actions were impossible. But Seina's current mission, simply put, was to wander around aimlessly and attract pirates wherever he went. In other words, officially, he could go anywhere within the Galactic Federation's controlled space.

“Um…” Seina activated the monitor displaying the galaxy's power map before him.

(I was taught that about one-third of the galaxy is under Galactic Federation control… but it always seemed pretty sparse… Ah, sure enough.)

The Galactic Federation's controlled space spread out like a network of veins or tree roots, forming a regular shipping route system, but the rest looked like a sponge full of holes. Pirates moved through those hole-like uncontrolled sectors as their territory.

“So there are still plenty of unexplored places…” Watching the monitor, Seina felt a question arise.

At that moment… “Captain, Test Flight Program 2 complete. All systems normal.” Kiriko's

voice interrupted Seina's thoughts.

“Proceed to Program 3.” Seina replied reflexively as he turned off the monitor.

“Roger. Program 3, initiate!”

With Kiriko's voice, the Kamidake initiated a short-range hyperspace jump to the next test sector.

“It's a bit disappointing that we've had absolutely no problems so far.” Amane stretched lazily, speaking once Kamidake had entered hyperspace and navigation stabilized.

“How many tests do you think we ran, cross-referencing with the captain's data, before Kamidake's commissioning? If problems kept cropping up like that, we'd be in real trouble.” Kiriko, who had been roped into Kamidake's test checks before, replied with a sullen expression.

“Do you have any idea how much time verifying a single problem takes?”

“I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you.”

“Ah, no, it's nothing the captain needs to worry about…” Kiriko quickly replied to Seina,

“Still, this ship is amazing… As expected of something built by Airi-sama, the feel is amazing.” Without a moment's pause, Amane spoke up, as if to bail Kiriko out.

“Really?” Seina, intrigued by Amane's enchantingly sweet voice, turned to look at her.

“In fact, it's far superior to the GP ships I've been on, the private luxury cruise ships, and even the privately owned ships of acquaintances that have had a ton of money poured into them. Of course, those ships are excellent in terms of living conditions, and they almost completely block out the vibrations and noises that can be unpleasant for people. But for the person operating the ship, it feels like touching things with gloves on, which can actually be stressful.”

“…I see.”

“Plus, its responsiveness is outstanding, and the hull balance is excellent, so I think it's capable of quite precise firing.”

Battleships—especially large ones—experienced slight hull distortion during combat maneuvers like sudden acceleration, deceleration, or evasion. This distortion affected the weapons mounted on the ship. While gyros were installed throughout the ship to detect misalignment, the tiny angular deviation caused by the correction lag significantly impacted hit accuracy during large-scale space combat.

“Too bad. We'll conduct the firing test after returning to base and completing the hull inspection. We're about to exit hyperspace. Begin preparations for the next test.” Kiriko's words snapped the relaxed atmosphere back into focus.

Minutes later, the Kamidake jumped out of hyperspace and encountered a medium-sized pirate ship.

“Oh my… Looks like the firing test got moved up.” Amane smiled, her expression devoid of tension.

“Damn it!” Glaring at Amane, Kiriko swiftly handled the unexpected situation. It was precisely the situation she had been waiting for.

“What the hell? You meet me and don't even have an empty container as a gift?”

The pirate's words were arrogant, confident in his overwhelming superiority. It was hardly surprising that he looked down on the Kamidake, a small vessel less than half the size of his own ship, with no significant armament visible.

“---Stop this pointless resistance and shut down your ship.”

The pirates, impatient with Hakuren's businesslike warning to surrender, fired a warning shot without any doubt about their superiority. Kamidake interpreted this as an attack and engaged them.

Within ten minutes of the engagement starting, the pirate's previously arrogant expression changed completely.

“W-wait! Disguised ships are cowardly!”

The pirates likely never imagined that Kamidake, a vessel they considered small, possessed such overwhelming firepower. Yet, even with its GP Delivery Division livery, a pirate with a shred of foresight would have noticed something off about Kamidake .

“S-stop! Stop it!!”

It took a full minute for the pirate's words to become something closer to a scream. But even then, Kamidake's attack did not cease.

“……”

Without a word, Amane, the attacker, glanced briefly at Seina.

Even though he was merely a figurehead captain, his position granted solely to determine Kamidake's course, the decision to continue the attack rested with Seina. Yet he remained silent, glaring at the pirate ship.

(…Why?)

When Kamidake initiated the attack, Seina felt a strange sense of satisfaction, as the impulse to strike the pirates perfectly aligned with his own disgust toward them. Anger and confusion consumed his consciousness, and the pirates' screams, bordering on pleas, went

unheard.

Noticing Seina's unusual demeanor, Kiriko and the crew patiently waited for his orders, careful not to inflict fatal wounds on the enemy.

—Waaah!

What echoed from beyond the pirates' pleading voices was unmistakably the cry of an infant.

“!! Cease fire!” At that cry, Seina snapped back to his senses and shouted.

“Cease fire!”

Kiriko repeated Seina's orders, and Hakuren again began to urge the pirates to surrender, which of course the pirates did not refuse.

“Captain, I need to discuss a modification to the test plan with you. Hakuren, I'll leave the rest to you.” Kiriko said quietly and matter-of-factly before moving her seat to the lower block.

Seina, head bowed, followed suit, moving his seat to the captain's room.

“Oh dear, falling for such a basic trick. I suppose a child really can't handle being captain after all.” Alan said with a boastful tone, loud enough for Hakuren and the others to hear, once Seina and Kiriko were out of sight, and a relaxed atmosphere had settled over the room

“I could've handled that better, though.”

“Oi, Alan…”

Realizing he might have gone too far, Barry and Cohen frowned and shot glances at Alan.

“He was only appointed captain to grant him authority over route decisions.” But Hakuren, still working, replied in a cheerful tone.

“Hahaha, true enough. We were chosen to assist him in his inexperience, after all. By the way, what are you all about? I mean… with beauties like you, you should have a fan club or something, don't you think?”

“We are Airi-sama's personal secretaries. More importantly, the test has been canceled, so please stand by.”

“Um, I'd like to talk to you for a moment…”

“Since your assignment was so sudden, you probably haven't finished organizing your personal belongings yet, right?”

After gently declining Alan's request, Hakuren refocused his attention on her work.

“Understood.”

Deciding that going any further would make him look bad, Alan began to lower the seat.

The bridge crew's seats were equipped to move directly to any level. Alan's seat stopped five floors below, in the general crew quarters block.

“Airi-sama's personal secretaries… quite a handful, huh?” Still seated, Barry muttered with a sigh, shoulders slumped.

“Yeah, you're right.”

Seeing Barry and Cohen slumped, Alan stood up from his seat, winked lightly and said, “Come on, there are plenty of ways to handle this.”

“H-how? They’re Airi-sama's personal secretaries! Their income must be huge… Even judging by the funds we received for Ryoko-sama's fan club, couldn't Airi-sama pay them much more than that?”

“Above all, they handle top-level secrets, so personal information security must be tight, and they're probably under constant surveillance. That goes for us too. We couldn't stir things up by leaking footage, let alone forming a fan club—even unofficially…”

“Hey, hey, with that much material, you could turn it into something way bigger than some measly fan club. You saw Gyokuren, right? She could make it in the top modeling world or showbiz… no, she's beyond even that, a woman of the highest caliber. The other girls aren't ordinary either.”

“True, if we could set up an agency and manage them… But wouldn't the confidentiality barriers be too high to even headhunt them?”

“If they're willing, it doesn't matter. Well, there's probably a confidentiality period, so for a little while after they quit, there might be restrictions and monitoring.”

“…Would they be willing?”

“There's no woman who doesn't dream of becoming a star in the entertainment industry! They'll definitely take the bait!” After making that bold declaration, Alan crossed his arms and leaned back.

Getting carried away so quickly was one of Alan's bad habits. While his positivity was a strength, he often confused his imagination with reality, losing his ability to view situations objectively.

“I see!” As usual, Barry and Cohen instantly agreed without even considering whether Alan's idea was feasible.

“Oh, this is my room… Hmm?”

Finding his name on the layout chart in the small entrance, Alan immediately frowned. Not

only was his name there, but the other two's names were written as well.

“Hey, why are three of us sharing a room when there are so many rooms available?”

Though the Kamidake was a small ship, it was designed to accommodate up to fifty people, including a relief crew. A quick glance at the layout showed at least thirty rooms.

“Isn't it because we're the lowest-ranking?”

“Even if we are the lowest-ranking, bridge operators are non-commissioned officers! We deserve proper treatment!”

“…Yeah, you're right.” Barry thought for a moment, then immediately looked up.

“Alright! We're going straight to Seina to talk this out!”

“Hey, you two… he's the captain, you know.” Cohen, hesitating for once, tried to stop them.

“He’s just a figurehead. Since we've gone out of our way to look after him all this time, he won't treat us coldly.” Alan this with a smirk just as the door to the empty room opened, and Gyokuren and Karen stepped out.

“Oh, what are you two talking about?” Gyokuren said, smiling brightly at Alan.

“!”

Seeing Gyokuren's beauty up close, Alan and the others froze in place, as if struck by paralysis.

“Don't waste time, tidy up your room and get some rest. You all know the Captain's special abilities, right?” Karen stepped forward as if to shield Gyokuren.

Alan and the others relaxed, their expressions easing as if freed from paralysis.

(Oh, come on.) Karen didn't particularly enjoy Alan’s reaction. But with Gyokuren as the comparison, it couldn't be helped, and this kind of reaction was nothing new.

“A-actually, we were looking for our room… and…” Alan's momentum was slowed down by Gyokuren, and he pointed timidly at the plate with the layout diagram.

“Ah, I see.” Karen, understanding Alan's intent, turned back to look at the room they'd just come from. “The other rooms are full of measuring equipment set up to record this experiment.”

“Everything except our room?”

“To be precise, all except the minimum living space. That's why we're also sharing rooms in pairs.”

Normally, senior officers like Karen would be given private quarters.

“Because the Kamidake is a new model for mass production, we need to iron out as many problems as possible before putting it into production. That's one of the reasons why the Captain was given this ship.” Gyokuren peered over Karen's shoulder as she spoke. It was like the moment during a total solar eclipse when the sun, completely hidden by the moon's shadow, briefly reappeared.

“Ah, I see… If Seina—I mean, the captain—can board and navigate without issues, it's practically the same as having no initial defects, right?” Alan said then retreated toward his quarters like a nocturnal animal frightened by the glare.

“That's it.”

“Then we'll stand by in our quarters.”

“That's right. Our statute of limitations for declassification is unlimited, just to be clear.” Karen smiled and said, as Alan tried to push Barry and Cohen into his room.

“What?!”

The door closed, hiding Alan and the others as they stumbled inside, and the lock indicator plate lit up.

“Oh dear, how pitiful. Couldn't we have let them enjoy their sweet dreams a little longer?” Gyokuren asked while smiling sweetly.

Karen glared at her with a demonic expression. “Let me make this clear: I have no intention of overlooking your bad taste this time, nor do I plan to play along.”

“Oh dear, how frightening… But I understand perfectly well what this situation means.” Gyokuren said nonchalantly, as Karen dragged her somewhat forcefully into the elevator.

She didn't want Alan and the others to hear this conversation. In fact, upon learning that Karen and her group had overheard their conversation, Alan and the others were trembling in fear, wondering what fate awaited them, and were eavesdropping on Karen's group's conversation through the intercom from inside the room.

“Then you understand it's better to let

them focus solely on their work while they're on this ship, right?” Karen said with a heavy sigh as the elevator doors closed.

“They're just temporary replacements to meet GP regulations. They're not actually needed. And you know why they got stuck with this thankless task, don't you? Or could it be that Gyokuren-san has an interest in show business?” Karen's response was more scathing than usual.

As long as Alan and his crew were just fantasizing about making a quick buck off Gyokuren and the others, Gyokuren was harmless. She was well aware of the influence her beauty commanded. She couldn't afford to waste energy worrying about the delusions of others. But if Alan and his crew tried to put even the slightest bit of their fantasies into action, they—no, everyone involved—would face hell. And that resentment would eventually be directed at Seina.

“That's fine…”

——Sounds interesting.

Gyokuren was about to say so, but stopped herself. If she made a mistake, she might lose contact with Seina. If they knew that Seina would be harmed, Kiriko, Seto, Airi, Tennyo, and even Karen, who was right in front of her, would all try to keep Gyokuren away from Seina.

Seina's existence wasn't something Gyokuren could casually weigh against mere pastime and pleasure.

“Understood. I get it.” Gyokuren said with a serious expression.

×××

The scene in the captain's stateroom, with Seina and Kiriko standing there, was quite an odd picture.

A boy with a shaved head still retaining traces of youth, and a composed woman who could be either a teacher or a secretary. Seina, head bowed, sat in the captain's chair as if being scolded by Kiriko.

(Their positions are reversed, huh?) Amane watched them, struggling to stifle a laugh.

“I'm sorry,” Seina said, still hanging his head.

“The captain has nothing to apologize for regarding that matter. Even if we had sunk them, it wouldn't have been a problem with that opponent.”

“Huh?” Seina looked up with a puzzled expression.

“What I want to ask is, what were you thinking at that time?” Kiriko asked.

“…Kiriko,” Amane interrupted Kiriko and glanced over at Seina.

Seeing Seina looking up at her with puzzlement, Kiriko realized her explanation had been too hasty. She sighed and closed her eyes.

“I said there was no need to apologize because that pirate vessel merely demanded we cease fire—it did not express any intention to surrender or cease combat readiness. In other words, it was reasonable to conclude they intended to flee or counterattack if we showed any weakness. Moreover, they are a Class-A criminal vessel. Do you understand?”

In other words, it would have been perfectly acceptable to sink them then and there.

“What I want to know is, when the opposing pirates first asked you to stop the attack, why didn't you give the order to stop the attack? A normal captain would have given the order to stop the attack immediately. What on earth were you thinking?”

After that explanation, Seina finally grasped Kiriko's intent.

“…I find the very existence of pirates puzzling.”

“Puzzling?”

“The universe is so vast and free…”

The entire captain's room was filled with a projection of space, making Seina, Kiriko, and Amane feel as if they were floating in the cosmos.

“Within the galaxy… no, within the Galactic Federation, there are countless uncharted habitable planets. If you include those recruiting colonists, the number is beyond estimation…” Seina clenched his fist tightly.

Kiriko and Amane quickly realized what Seina was trying to say: poverty was the main reason people commit piracy.

“Because they don't have it, and because they need it, they take it.”

But strictly speaking, those who possessed pirate ships weren't poor. If they could just get their hands on the minimal equipment needed for planetary development… if the planet was somewhat habitable to begin with… They possessed both the power to reach it and the power to survive there. Even if large-scale development wasn't possible right away, they could gradually expand the scale of development using their own ingenuity.

If a planet had already been colonized, it could be assumed that it had an environment similar to that of a developed country on Earth. In essence, there was no need to take from others.

“Then why?”

“There are various reasons, but the main one is… it's quicker that way. Like the monkey in the “Monkey and Crab Battle” fable, it's easier to climb the tree than build it through hard work. In this case, it's military force, but exploiting that characteristic to take things is simpler. Moreover, the number one reason captured pirates gave for becoming pirates was

inheriting the 'family business'.”

“That’s the reason?!” Seina's face flushed red with anger.

“Of course, men like Tarrant are special cases. …Captain. You are aware that there exists a certain code between us and pirates, aren't you?” Kiriko waited for Seina's nod before continuing.

“They get scraps that really aren't worth serious effort… Their sense of guilt is surprisingly low—they're pirates simply because they inherited the family business, without any particularly special reason. Most of them are just ordinary people, and as proof, the recidivism rate among captured pirates is surprisingly low.”

“Pirates… family business…”

That was a remnant from before the Galactic Federation was formed. Back then, many planets were still hostile. Attacking enemy transport ships and seizing goods served the national interest—damaging the enemy while enriching themselves. It was only natural that this wasn't just encouraged by each nation's military, but also by private citizens. Eventually, it became established as a family business.

“Admittedly, that peculiar rule certainly contributes to the proliferation of pirates. But equipping every ship with escorts would make our business unsustainable.”

“A necessary evil…?” Blood seeped from Seina's tightly clenched lips.

“This ship and its captain are the solution to that dilemma.”

“!!” Seina looked up in surprise.

“Until now, we've been pruning overgrown shoots. But now, the possibility has emerged to eliminate the root cause itself. Thanks to the pirates and criminals captured through the Captain's actions, the Galactic Federation's economic revitalization rate is now at its highest level in hundreds of years. It will likely grow even further. I haven't been briefed on the details, but this is a far larger plan than the Captain realizes.”

“Me and… this ship?” Seina's expression, which had been somewhat subdued, began to brighten.

Seeing this, Kiriko nodded with satisfaction.

“Well, it's a bit early, but Captain, please get some rest.” With that, Kiriko bowed and promptly left the room.

“Oh, come on, she’s so indifferent. She picked this spot because she didn't want the others to see her, didn't she?” Amane chuckled regretfully and sat down on the armrest of the captain's chair.

“Well then, I'll go get something to eat.”

Trying to avoid Amane's somehow seductive gaze, Seina attempted to rise from his chair, only to be grabbed by the collar and pulled back down.

Leaning against him, Amane ran a hand through Seina's closely cropped hair and murmured, “Hey, why did you do something like that, Seina-chan? …Or, I should just say it like I always do. Ahahahaha!” Amane burst out laughing as if to cancel out the sexiness that had been present up until then.

“Amane!” Kiriko rushed back into the captain's room, grabbed Amane by the collar, and tried to drag her out of the room as if she were carrying a kitten.

“Wait! Kiriko-san. Is the baby on that ship okay?” Seina called out to Kiriko, stopping her. That was the trigger that led Seina to issue the order to cease fire.

“There was no baby on that ship.”

“Huh? But…”

“It's a common tactic. You know how commercials sometimes play sounds like doorbells or knocks when they want to grab someone's attention? It's the same thing. They deliberately played those sounds to stop the attack.”

“Don't worry about it. Even if they know, rookie captains usually fall for it anyway. It's just a little rite of passage, really.” Amane laughed and said, echoing Kiriko's words.

“I see… That's a relief.”

Seina seemed to have mixed feelings. He didn't want to sink the ship now, but he had been fooled by a first-class criminal ship. Depending on the situation, it could have allowed the enemy to counterattack.

“Captain, that's why we're here to assist you.”

“Exactly. We're not stupid enough to let them fight back.”

Amane and Kiriko said with a bright laugh, trying not to sound too serious.

“What do you think? I thought he might be dwelling on it a bit longer…” Airi said to Mikami and Minaho sitting across from her while reviewing Kiriko's report.

“I guess you could say that it's worth living with such an extreme probability bias.”

“I think it would be better if he was a little more childish.”

“Is it boring…?” Mikami said, glancing at Airi, who looked confused and pouting.

“It's an elder's duty to heal wounded hearts, after all.” Airi made a sensual gesture, as if embracing something.

“It seems like he's going to have a different trauma. Ha ha ha.”

“Trauma… You see! I'm still confident in many ways.”

“Overdosing on medicine can be poisonous, you know. Besides… isn't that the job of Kiriko-san and the other girls?”

“But it's so frustrating! Why don't you just go all the way already!”

Watching this scene beside Mikami, Minaho—the result of going all the way, as Airi put it—let out a deep sigh.

“You'll just make people dislike you if you push too hard, Mom.” Giving Airi a cold glance, Minaho turned back to Mikami.

“Mikami-sama, regarding Seina-kun, there are no issues at this time, correct?”

“Well… his reaction and attitude towards pirates may be immature, but he's genuinely rational. And his emotional fluctuations are far less than we imagined.”

Mikami leaned closer to Minaho and whispered, making sure Airi couldn't hear, “But as Airi-sama said, whether that's a good thing or not… well, I find that rather complicated myself.” Sounding a little sad

Minaho responded with a wry smile.

“Airi-sama. What about Kamidake?” Mikami asked in a terribly businesslike tone as she turned back to Airi, who was sulking after Minaho's sharp remark, It meant she had no intention of entertaining the dejected Airi.

“…Hmph! I have no complaints since we were able to easily obtain combat data for the most unlikely of situations. Test data collection is also going smoothly…” Airi, still pouting, sprawled across the desk to look at the data. “…For now, anyway.”

“Let's have the ship return immediately and check the hull.”

Ignoring Airi's sulky state, Mikami and Minaho closed the monitor and stood up. …And then Airi, who had been slumped over, stood up with a completely different look on her face, looking very happy.

“That's right! While we're at it, let's get that plan done, even if it means moving up the schedule a little!”

“You mean… that thing?”

“Yes! That one! That one! The setup's already done, right? All that's left is the timing to pull it off?”

“But…” Mikami looked slightly troubled and glanced at Minaho.

Minaho turned on the monitor she had just closed and began checking the schedule.

“Hey, let's do it. Hey, hey.” Like a child begging for candy or a toy, Airi pouted as she spoke.

Out of the corner of her eye, Minaho finished checking the data on the monitor, then looked at Mikami and nodded.

Mikami seemed to ponder for a moment, then said, “Okay, let's get started right away.” With just that, she hurried toward the transfer gate.

“Oh, and say hi for me ♡” Airi waved cheerfully at Mikami's retreating back.

Chapter Two: Commemoration, Consolation, and Hardship

After handing over the captured pirate ship and crew to the GP ship that had arrived upon receiving the report, the Kamidake returned to its dedicated dock on the outer ring of the Academy.

“Good work, Captain.” Tennyo, Hakuryo, and Elma greeted him.

While it lacked the lively atmosphere of his maiden voyage, their smiles still brought him joy.

“Well then, I'll take care of the ship.” Hakuryo said, then ran off toward the dock's control room.

Seina was led by Tennyo and Elma into a small medical room overlooking Kamidake. Kamidake was heading towards the water tank below. It was the same scene Seina had seen when he arrived at the Academy on the transport ship.

“Seina-chan, stand here.”

“Ah, yes.” Seina climbed onto the bio-scanner platform, glancing sideways at Kamidake.

There, he underwent a physical examination and hundreds of questions over the course of several hours.

“Well, Elma?” Once the questioning ended, Tennyo quickly organized the data and asked.

“Yes, some fatigue is noted in both body and mind, but it's within acceptable limits. No abnormalities.”

“Okay.” Tennyo looked at Seina and smiled.

With the work finished, Seina felt a sense of relief and release. He noticed Kamidake, visible through the window, had safely completed its descent into the tank over the course of several hours.

“It's fine. The facilities here are on a completely different level from regular docks.”

Seeing Seina exhale a sigh of relief, Tennyo chuckled softly.

“Huh!? Oh, wait… could it be…?”

“Of course I know. Right, Elma?”

“It was such an unusual case that it got pretty big coverage. Heh heh, though at the time, I had no idea Seina-kun was involved.”

“I-I see…”

Just as Seina looked down, slightly embarrassed, the door suddenly opened and someone walked in.

“Thank goodness, Seina-chan! I finally found you.” Though the face was hidden, the voice was unmistakably Tennyo's.

“Huh?”

The woman grabbed Seina's head and pulled him into a tight embrace against her chest. Seina couldn't breathe, pressed against those ample breasts, but the sensation was so seductive it made him forget everything else.

“Hey, listen, this is terrible…” The figure speaking with Tennyo's voice placed her hands on both of Seina's cheeks, forcibly turning his face toward hers.

GAIYIIIN! The instant Seina recognized that face as Tennyo's, a punch slammed deep into her face. The impact transformed her skin into a familiar pearlescent sheen.

(Ah, it's NB after all) Seina caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye, confirming that it was Tennyo herself who had delivered the vicious punch to the face of NB, now transformed into Tennyo. Simultaneously, he heard the sound of NB being violently thrown and slammed into the door.

“Honestly, Airi-sama is so persistent! Even when we all gang up and beat her to a pulp, she just revives right away.” Tennyo approached NB and pulled out something resembling a black pen. “Seina-chan, close your eyes and cover your ears for a moment.”

“Ah, yes!”

But before Seina could frantically obey Tennyo's instructions,

“No! Don't stick that thing in there…”

A faint, slightly strained yet alluring voice from NB Tennyo escaped. But Seina desperately pressed his ears shut, letting a small sound echo inside his mouth to block out the outside noise, trying not to think about what it might be.

A few minutes later, Tennyo tapped his shoulder, signaling the task was complete.

“It's not my fault. I didn't do anything wrong!”

As the half-crying NB threw himself into Seina's chest, Elma's bright red face, bowed down in shame, spoke volumes about the nature of Tennyo's work.

“Honestly, when did they even collect my personal data… And it's sooooo well done, it just makes it even more infuriating, doesn't it?”

“…I understand. Kiriko-san and I were collected too.”

“Ah, that thing… Wait!” Tennyo quickly covered her mouth before finishing her sentence.

Apparently, she was also part of the NB peeping squad.

“…Ahhhh, well, I can pretty much imagine. Especially Amane-chan and Gyokuren-san, right? They must have been incredible?”

“Yes. Honestly, it was absolutely no joke. Even from a female perspective, it was heart-pounding. Come to think of it, back then too, just like Tennyo-sama did just now, Kiriko-san was delivering merciless punches.”

“Well, Airi-sama's character data is seriously inappropriate for Seina-chan's education. If he'd learned from that, he'd never have a normal sex life.”

“Of course, we deleted all that data from NB afterward. The non-character data was incredibly well-made, so everyone saved their copies though…”

“Heh heh, too bad, Seina-chan… Oh, but maybe mine would be okay?”

“Huh?”

“Instead of that perverted character data Airi-sama had in there, I'll put in a proper simplified version of myself for you.”

That matter-of-fact tone was just like Airi.

“Um, well, it's kind of nice of you, but I'm not really into that sort of thing…”

“Ehh? Why? Don't you think it'd be better to get a little used to it before the real thing?”

“Um…”

Even if it was better to get used to it, thinking about the act objectively filled him with a sense of sadness. Of course, saying he wasn’t interested would be a lie, but it was also true that it felt like he was sullying his memories of Tenchi's mother, Kiyone.

“…Or do you hate me, Seina-chan?” Tennyo looked at him with sad eyes as she said this, and Seina couldn't understand why she wanted to be his personal practice partner so badly.

But he hesitated to ask why.

“That's not it at all! It's just… if by any chance the data leaked… in my case, that seems likely…”

“Hmmmmmm…” Even Tennyo, apparently, didn't want to risk the danger of Airi's overly well-adjusted personal data leaking outside. But her desire to have Seina use it was also strong.

After some internal struggle, she deleted the data from the NB.

“Then how about another woman? I'll give you the access key for a counselor I know. She's not quite as good as Amane-san or Gyokuren-san, but she's a VIP-only counselor, so she's pretty.”

“…No, thank you.”

“Why not?”

“…Um… Why… Why do you insist on… um… making me practice so much?” Faced with such persistence, Seina finally decided to ask the reason outright.

“It was the same with Airi-san… She even used her own personal information…”

“Ah, I see…” Tennyo finally understood the meaning behind Seina's confusion.

“Well, yes. From an Earth perspective, it does seem strange, doesn't it? But Elma. Is what I was trying to do really that strange?”

“Um… I guess the way you approached it was a bit forceful?”

(…Come to think of it, Elma-san said something similar too)

At this point, it seemed like he had no allies.

(Could this be the standard way of thinking at the Academy?) Seina was starting to think that, but he also felt something was off. After comprehensively considering everything that had happened since arriving at the Academy,

(Maybe the people around me just have a bit of a special, or extreme, way of thinking. Airi-san has such a strong personality, maybe they've just been influenced by her?)

Just like the saying “monkey see, monkey do,” it seemed like everyone connected to Airi shared this similar extreme quality.

“Um… If Kiriko-san finds out, she'll scold me…”

“Kiriko-chan, huh… Hmm, I see.” Tennyo plopped down beside Seina and draped an arm over his shoulder.

“So your first time will be with Kiriko-chan herself, huh?”

At Tennyo's words, Seina blushed bright red up to his ears and looked down.

“Ufufu, how cute, Seina-chan. It's fine, I won't push you anymore. . When you come to understand more about what it means that you went up into space, I'll teach you again.”

“The meaning of going into space?”

“It's not that big of a deal, but for the current Seina-chan, it might be better not to know. Don't worry! It's more of an issue for Kiriko-chan anyway. This big sister will make sure to drill it into her properly.”

“????”

He didn't understand what Tennyo meant, but he knew it was something best not judged with his limited knowledge. Besides, he was grateful to avoid any more embarrassing topics. Unlike with Amane or Gyokuren, things felt different with Tennyo.

“…Oh, right! Seina-kun's teammates contacted me.”

“Huh? Kenneth and Rajau?”

“Checking and maintaining Kamidake will take a little while, so go play with your friends tomorrow. Also, NB knows where your dorm is, so go home now and get some rest.” Handing the adjusted NB to Seina, Tennyo flashed him a warm smile.

“Yes. Um, what about Kiriko-san and the others…”

SHIN TENCHI MUYO! RYO-OHKI GAIDEN
真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝
天地無用！GXP 6
TENCHI MUYO!
Erma moved away and pretended to work as she watched the woman. She had blonde hair, brown skin, and blue eyes. She was wearing optical camouflage similar to Kiriko's when she fought Tarant's pirates. Her hair was shorter than Amane's, and just from her gestures, it was apparent that her whole body was like a mass of springs.

“They have other work to do. They already know your schedule, so it's fine. Just relax.”

“Understood.” Seina bowed, then carried the still-squirming NB out of the room.

Almost immediately, a woman beside Tennyo deactivated her sub-space cloak and materialized.

(I've seen her a few times… Could she be connected to the Kuramitsu’s?) Elma moved away and pretended to work while watching the woman.

She had blonde hair, brown skin, and blue eyes. She was wearing optical camouflage similar to what Kiriko was wearing when she fought Tarrant’s pirates. Her hair was shorter than Amanes’, and just from her gestures, it was apparent that her whole body was like a mass of springs.

(Like a black panther… but…) Elma decided she was connected to the Kuramitsu family not only because of her appearance, but also because she possessed a gentle, easygoing aura, somehow charming even within her stern expression.

Mesmerizing——Since becoming Airi's secretary, Elma had encountered many women she rarely saw in her daily life. Among them, this woman possessed an aura comparable to the top-tier figures like Seto and Airi. Unnoticed, Elma's hands stopped working as she stared at the woman. The woman glanced over and smiled.

“!!”

Like a fan caught in a star's gaze, Elma flushed bright red and froze, unable to move as if paralyzed. She couldn't tear her eyes away from those mesmerizing blue eyes.

“I look forward to working with you.”

At Tennyo's words, the woman smiled and vanished back into sub-space. Elma, who had been staring as if drawn in, lost her balance as if her support had vanished and quickly placed her hand on the edge of the console.

“Um… that person just now…?” Elma stared in the direction the woman had vanished, murmuring with flushed cheeks.

“Heh, you'll find out soon enough.” Tennyo gave Elma a firm pat on the shoulder, as if to snap her out of it. “But, continuing from what I was saying earlier, I think you would be fine.”

“Huh? What were we talking about earlier…?”

“Seina-chan's sex education talk. Hey, Elma, won't you teach him?”

“What!? Weren't we supposed to leave it alone for a while?”

“I did say that, but I think a little outside pressure is necessary after all.”

“You mean use me as a decoy?” Elma looked a little displeased.

“Oh my, does that mean you're serious about Seina-chan?”

“Whether I'm serious… Honestly, I'm not entirely sure myself. Besides, Seina-kun is still a minor…” Elma said, a little hesitant.

It was too early to decide if they’d walk together in the future.

“So you don't dislike him?”

“Of course not, but being expected to go that far is a bit… Plus, I'm a little scared of Kiriko-san too…”

“I think Elma would be fine, though.”

“Seina-kun's home planet only has one species, right? So wouldn't it be better to start with someone of the same form?”

Even humans living at the Academy often felt bewildered by the gap between their theoretical knowledge and the reality of interacting with non-human species. For Seina, born on Earth, this could potentially become a kind of trauma.

“Hmm… I see… That's definitely a possibility…” Tennyo scratched her head regretfully and leaned back in her chair. “But if Airi-sama ends up being the one to do it, you'd want to take her place, right?”

“W-Well… I suppose that might be true.” Elma blurted out without thinking.

“Well then, if that happens, I'll be counting on you.” Tennyo patted Elma's shoulder like sealing a contract, then returned to work.

Seina, accompanied by NB, returned to the Academy's home planet for the first time in several months.

They arrived at the transfer port inside GP Academy via the main planet's transfer port from the outer ring, still early in the morning.

“Heyyy, Seina! Here, here!”

Kenneth and Rajau were waiting in a small parking lot behind the building housing the transfer port. After a brief reunion greeting, Seina was practically pulled into a small aircar by Rajau.

“Alright, let's go!”

“Whoa!” Seina's body slammed into the back seat as the aircar accelerated abruptly.

“Don't be reckless, Kenneth!”

“Hah! We only have today! Can't waste a single second.” Kenneth laughed without slowing down.

Having grown accustomed to the inertia, Seina sat up and settled into his seat. Then, the aircar's roof folded back, letting in the still-cool early morning breeze and the damp scent of trees.

“Planet-side really is nice, isn't it?” Seina stretched his arms wide, yawned, and took a deep breath.

The spaceship interior was more comfortably adjusted than Seina had imagined, but the physical sensations on the ground and inside the ship were still completely different. The only ship that made him forget that difference, for now, was Seto's Mikagami.

The thin morning mist and the spotlight-like rays of sunlight filtering through the trees covering the road were incredibly beautiful, even fantastical. Seina felt a sense of liberation, like stretching his arms fully in a spacious bath.

“Hey Kenneth, there's a police car about a kilometer behind you. You must be going too fast.” NB said, approaching Kenneth.

“Gah! Why so early in the morning…”

Seconds after Kenneth slowed down, the GP patrol car drew near. Inside were Officers Carol and Ameri, the same officers they'd encountered when they'd slipped out of the dormitory before.

“Hey there! You kids!”

Sergeant Carol, leaning out the window to yell, noticed Yamada Seina in the car.

“Geh! Yamada Seina!”

“What!?”

Officer Ameri, who was driving, pulled Officer Carol back into the car while slamming on the brakes and making a hard U-turn.

“Damn it, you brats! I'll let you off today, but stick to the speed limit!” Carol yelled through the loudspeaker as the GP patrol car sped off, easily exceeding the legal speed limit.

“What was that all about… that policewoman?”

“Ha ha! That rough tone and voice? That's the policewoman who fired at us when we snuck out of the dorm that time.”

“Oh, right, that happened too. Still can't figure out those people.”

Beside Kenneth and Rajau were laughing, Seina, who knew the details, watched the departing GP patrol car with a slightly awkward expression.

“Well, can't be helped. Guess we'll have to save those ladies' faces.”

“I suppose so.”

The wind hitting his face became gentler than before, and Seina took another deep breath—

and the next moment, just as he thought he smelled the scent of the sea in his nostrils, the trees and mountains that had covered the landscape disappeared behind him, and the emerald green sea and the cone-shaped city came into view.

“Wow!”

It was City 773, where they had previously snuck out of the dormitory to go play. Bathed in the morning sun, the city shone silver, displaying a beauty different from its night view.

Upon arriving in the city, Seina and the boys parked their aircar in the parking lot at the base and headed straight for the elevator to the outer monorail station on the upper floor.

“Seina-kun, over here!”

Following Rajau's instructions, he passed through the ticket gate and jumped onto the monorail parked at the farthest platform.

But before Seina could react, the car body that should have been there vanished, replaced by the sight of the azure sea and sky.

“Ah!” Seina reflexively grabbed the handrail near the entrance, but…

CRACK! The handrail snapped, and Seina felt as if he'd been thrown into empty air—but then, a loud thud and a dull pain in his head stopped his body.

“Oh, did I do that?”

“I see, so this was your first time riding this, Seina-kun?”

Kenneth and Rajau laughed as they helped Seina up.

“Huh… what?”

Looking around in wonder, Seina noticed that the floor, the entire wall opposite the entrance, and the entire ceiling of the vehicle he was now in were made of a single, frameless sheet of glass. Below him lay the city and the sea, churning with white waves.

“!!”

The glass, devoid of any reflection, was so transparent it was impossible to tell if it was even there. Seina, overcome by a terrifying sense of being pulled in, stumbled backward and leaned against the wall near the entrance.

“Seina-kun, over here!” Rajau pulled Seina's clothes and sat him down in a seat by the wall near the entrance as the monorail started moving.

“Whew… That scared me.”

“This line runs the furthest around the perimeter. What do you think? Nice view, right?”

Seina finally settled into his seat and focused his gaze not downward, but toward the horizon. The beautiful sea, reminiscent of a tropical resort, and the massive cumulonimbus clouds rising from the horizon gave him a strange, exhilarating feeling, like he was flying through the sky. He suddenly noticed a gentle airflow inside the car, moving in the direction the monorail was traveling.

“Beautiful… more than that, it feels good.”

“Flying is prohibited here because the buildings are too close. That's why you can only see this scenery from this ride. It's a place where you can really feel the height, so it's quite thrilling, right?”

“It runs year-round, you know. Sunrise, sunset, and the view late at night are beautiful too. It's become a bit of a date spot.”

“Huh… It does feel nice, doesn't it?”

The monorail spiraled upward along the city's outer perimeter. Now, the view stretched out before Seina, and buildings lay visible at his feet.

“…Whoa! You really feel the height up here.”

Glancing down suddenly, Seina felt a tingling sensation in his buttocks and quickly looked up toward the city's summit where the monorail was heading.

×××

The monorail made no stops along the way, arriving directly at the terminal station at the summit. The station featured only a very simple gate, giving it the feel of a rural unmanned station.

Passing through the gate, a vast symmetrical garden and a pure white dome lay before them.

(It looks just like a cemetery.) Seina instinctively thought.

A solemn atmosphere flowed through the place. While there were people present, it felt completely cut off from the urban clamor.

“Seina-kun, let's go.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Rajau and Kenneth, began walking toward the dome with solemn expressions. Seina felt certain his earlier prediction was correct, given the atmosphere.

“I don't know how it is on your planet, Seina-kun, but many people connected to the Academy have solar burials.” Rajau said quietly.

“Solar burial? You mean the bodies…”

“Well… if the sun is a tombstone, then on any planet… no, anywhere in this Galactic Federation sector, you can usually see it, you know.”

Climbing the stairs and entering the building, the space was dimly lit, with nothing but a dome-shaped ceiling. But sunlight was blocked from that ceiling, revealing countless stars. The Academy's sun appeared as a particularly large sphere. And perhaps because that was the way they prayed in their homeland, the people there gazed up at the stars and prayed in various ways.

“Ah!” Kenneth and Rajau gasped simultaneously.

They turned to see Miki's teammates, Miranda and Caliche, saluting and looking up at the Academy's sun. Seeing them, Seina realized that this was a memorial for Miki.

“……”

Seina and the boys stood beside Miranda and Caliche, saluting the Academy sun in the same manner.

It wasn't that Miki had been buried in that sun, but there were cases where bodies could not be recovered after a spacecraft accident. That was why bereaved families and friends each choose a sun to serve as a memorial for the deceased, based on their own beliefs.

Seina thought about what to say to Miki, but since Miki seemed very energetic and positive, he decided not to offer condolences, but to tell her about what had happened up to that point and his plans for the future.

(…I'll do my best.)

After finishing their prayers, Seina and the others met Miranda and the Caliche in the outer garden to catch up on each other's recent events. They were relieved to see Seina looking well and were very happy about his appointment as captain. They also learned that Miki's father seemed to be doing well, working on repairs underground and having been invited to join some research team.

After confirming everyone's safety, Miranda said they had to prepare for training exercises and left immediately. Seina and the boys waved until the monorail carrying them disappeared from view.

“They seem busy, huh?”

“The seniors already have concrete plans after graduation. Their training is specialized to match that.”

“Hey, shouldn't we have taken that train too?”

“That one goes straight to the starting station. We're taking the local train down below.”

With that, Kenneth and the boys descended the stairs beside the platform.

The train waiting on the lower platform was an ordinary commuter car. As they boarded, the nearly empty car began to move.

“Hey, Rajau… Do souls really exist?” As he sat down, Seina suddenly asked Rajau, who was sitting next to him.

“Souls, you say?”

Seeing Rajau's puzzled expression, Seina realized the concept of a soul was something specific to Earth.

“Yeah… I mean, how should I explain it? It's something said to reside within humans. Even after the body dies, it doesn't disappear…”

“You mean like the concept of reincarnation?”

“Yes, that's probably it.”

“It's a common belief in early civilizations. Well, it's sort of there, sort of not…” It was an uncharacteristically vague response from Rajau.

“?”

“I don't know how it's thought of in Seina-kun's homeland, but what they call the soul here is probably what we'd call the Astral.”

“Astral?”

“I don't know much about it either, and honestly, it seems there are various problems, so research hasn't really progressed much…” Rajau glanced at Seina, “Plus, it often clashes with other religious views, so I'm not sure if I should explain it.” Rajau said, looking somewhat troubled.

It was like the conflict between the “heliocentric theory” and the “geocentric theory” during Earth's Middle Ages.

“I don't have any issues with that sort of thing, so it's fine.”

“Is that so?” Rajau began speaking with a sense of relief.

“First, in our dimension—well, some theories suggest it exists in nearly all dimensions—there is something called the Astral Sea, perfectly overlapping that space. The Astral Sea has peculiar properties. When matter forms or life arises in our world, whether it's a person or an object, a similar field forms in the Astral Sea and connects to it. And it's said that memories from this side—like the experiences and emotions people feel—are stored there.”

“Memories?”

“Yes. And when a person on this side dies, that field disappears, but the memorized thing doesn't vanish; it apparently remains in the Astral Sea. I suspect the idea of past lives or reincarnation stems from the memory feedback phenomenon caused by the similarity of astral forms.”

“You mean that memory can be read? By another person?”

“Well, you see. Each astral has something unique like blood type or genes. Though, that is… Yes, Rajau-kun, please continue.” Kenneth had tried to show off his knowledge, but unable to articulate it clearly, he simply backed out.

“Right, right. Astral forms are far more complex than combinations of genetic base sequences, and as far as we know, no discernible patterns have been discovered yet. So when we say they're similar, it's only in very minor aspects. The astral form is like an access terminal connecting the astral sea—think of it as a frequency in communication terms. That's why astral beings with similar parts can read each other's memories, albeit very slightly. As I mentioned earlier, the astral sea's memory persists even after the physical body perishes. That's why we experience déjà vu or memories of past lives. It's caused by this memory feedback.”

“Still, it all depends on how you look at it. The Astral Sea might just be the afterlife.”

“Indeed, since the Astral Sea contains the memories and individuality of every life that has ever existed, what you say, Kenneth-kun, isn't entirely wrong.”

“I see…”

“Still, resurrecting a specific person is impossible, you know.” Rajau said, as if reading Seina's thoughts.

“Huh?”

“Even a cloned individual won't have the same astral pattern as the original. In fact, it's said there's virtually no overlap at all. Plus, while measuring the astral pattern is relatively simple, the real problem is that reproducing and fixing it into another body requires an enormous amount of energy. If anything, organ transplants are more likely to trigger memory feedback.”

“Plus, they say messing with the Astral Sea brings a curse.”

“Huh?” At that unrealistic, occult-sounding remark, Seina stared intently at Kenneth's face.

But Rajau just shrugged with a wry smile. “He’s not joking.”

“Huh?”

“There are theories about why the Astral Sea was formed, or even created, but that Hakubi Washu apparently called the Astral Sea a 'system for creating gods'.”

“Creating gods?”

“Just think about it. It contains all the memories from the creation of the universe. There's no guarantee that the science and technology currently available at the Academy is the most advanced. There may have been more advanced science elsewhere in the universe, or in prehistoric civilizations. The Astral Sea, which contains these memories, is undoubtedly omniscient.”

“That does sound incredible… doesn't it?”

“That's why so many people want to utilize the Astral Sea. If one could freely access the memories stored within it—memories of every event that has ever occurred in the universe, from the past to the present—its value would be immeasurable. It's even thought possible to simulate the future not just as predictions, but at the level of foresight or prophecy.”

“…And those who entertain such thoughts keep getting struck by misfortune.”

“I can't say whether it's true or not, but it seems natural to think that the Astral Sea, having become a collective of knowledge, possesses some kind of will… What's wrong?” Rajau noticed Seina's wry smile.

“Sorry… I just… it all seems so absurd.”

“Is that funny?”

“Hahaha. Seina probably meant it to be more philosophical, or rather, more emotional. But it turned into a completely scientific discussion, so he was taken aback.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Sorry. You were trying to teach me all this stuff…”

“It's fine. But even if the consciousness and memories of the deceased are stored in the Astral Sea, death remains an irreversible thing.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

“For now, let's just say what happened at the prayer site helped us reaffirm our purpose and mindset as members of the GP. Next, let's get back to living as individuals.”

“You're right.”

Kenneth and Rajau practically pulled Seina off the monorail as it arrived at some station, then headed toward the city.

The boys led Seina to a familiar coffee shop. It was the very place where he had met Widow.

“First, let's celebrate our safe reunion!” Kenneth led the toast as they clinked glasses.

Sipping cold juice, Seina looked around. The cityscape had been completely restored, and not a trace of the damage wrought by that colossal ship remained.

“So, Seina, how do you like being captain?”

“Well, 'captain' is just a fancy title for navigation officer. My term only lasted during the ship's testing phase anyway.”

“That's still impressive. You're the top performer among your peers.”

“It's still just training. Who knows what will happen next.”

“So modest, so modest! This isn't some idol's one-day captain event! Normally, even during training, you wouldn't be allowed to take on a captain's role!”

“That's great, Seina-kun.”

“Thanks.” Seina was touched by how genuinely happy Kenneth and Rajau were for him, as if it were their own achievement.

“We won't see each other for a while. Let's go all out today!”

“Right! Let's go all out, Captain! Seina-kun's treat!”

“Huh?”

Behind their unusually enthusiastic reaction lay their ulterior motive.

“Of course we'll chip in a little too! We're covering this round!”

“But for Seina, when the moment comes… you know, that thing we couldn't do before…”

“Exactly! That 'Imuimu’ place. By the way, I heard they're recruiting new members now! Plus, if you go with a member, you can bring up to two guests!” Kenneth slammed a lavish brochure down on the table.

Seeing the membership fee and annual dues listed there, Seina felt a little dizzy. The membership fee alone could buy a luxury car, and the annual fee was enough to buy a house.

“Look… there's no way I have that kind of crazy money. Besides, payday is still a long way off.”

“Really? Since Seina's special, hasn't it come in already?”

“No!”

“Tch… What a bummer.” Kenneth slumped his entire body, looking utterly disappointed, and put away the pamphlet.

“Guess I'll have to wait until Seina gets paid then…”

“You're joking, right… about that?”

Without answering Seina's question, Kenneth looked from him and began muttering something under his breath as he fell deep in thought.

“By the way, how much is Seina-kun's salary?”

“Huh? …I don't know. Come to think of it, I never asked.”

“What? You went through training without even asking about the terms?”

“I didn't have any other options, so what could I do?”

“Well, this is Master’s salary.”

Then, NB—who had been silent the entire time, almost forgotten (though NB was meant to be that kind of presence)—climbed onto the table and presented a figure. Kenneth and Rajau peered over with interest, their mouths gaping in surprise. But their expressions clearly showed disappointment.

“No way… only three times what we make?”

“Huh!? That much?”

“You idiot! It's not that much, it's just that little!”

“Exactly! It's only three times more than us lowly grunts!”

“What's the point of living now? Even if we become captains, our pay only goes up three times?”

Kenneth and Rajau looked like they were about to cry.

“Relax, this is just the base salary. The higher-ups get all kinds of allowances on top of that. Plus, they get hefty bonuses based on performance.”

“R-really?”

“Well, since you're still a trainee, it seems you won't get any of that at all.”

“What… Ah, so my 'Imuimu' was just a dream?”

Their joy was short-lived as Kenneth and Rajau slumped back into their chairs once more.

“You should just figure it out yourself, right? I've got no interest in 'Imuimu,' and besides, once I get paid, I've got to send money home, so I can't afford to waste it.”

“You're such a dreamless guy. Wasting money is a young person's privilege!”

“What can I say? My family was broke from my injuries and all the damages.”

“Well, considering Seina-kun's circumstances, I suppose it can't be helped.”

“Hmm… Alright, now that we're back to reality, let's stick to the original plan and splurge like poor students. You haven't been to school much, Seina, so there are probably lots of places you don't know about, right?”

“I'll show you some hidden gems my seniors told me about.”

Bouncing back quickly was one of Kenneth and Rajau’s strengths. After downing the last of their juice, they practically dragged Seina out of the cafe.

The ways students enjoy themselves aren't that different, whether in space or on Earth. Browsing shops they liked, eating at cheap, filling places tucked away in back alleys, chatting while snacking on street food—and trying to pick up girls.

Seina and the boys ate a cold dessert resembling soft-serve ice cream bought from a street stall as they navigated the maze-like city, eventually arriving at a plaza where several terraces were built around a giant tree.

They plopped down on a nearby empty bench, mechanically licking their ice cream with vacant eyes. In other words, their pick-up attempts had failed.

“Guess we picked the wrong spot to meet up. Who'd have thought Seina's…” Kenneth sighed, trailing off.

In this city near GP Academy, many people knew about Seina. While some might be curious about the commotion he caused, few actually tried to approach him. Once dusk fell and the city showed its nighttime face, there might be some daredevils who'd get close to Seina, but unfortunately, it was still early afternoon.

“Seriously, Seina! Why do you have to give off such a gloomy aura? That's why the girls are scared off!”

“Exactly. If you greeted people with a brighter smile that blew away any bad vibes, your pickup success rate would go way up!”

“Exactly! After all, Seina, you're a celebrity.”

“…Well, I'll take the first part of that as a compliment.”

After words of consolation, followed by remarks dripping with ulterior motives, it was hard to be genuinely happy. Still, speaking their minds honestly was one of their good points. At least, it meant things never got too serious, no matter what.

“Well, what can you do? Not many people would be kind enough to hang out with three kids who seem bored on a weekday afternoon and probably don't have any money.”

“Ugh!”

Kenneth glared at NB for voicing his honest thoughts.

“Well, unfortunately, NB's right, Seina-kun.”

“……Yeah, I guess NB is fine.” Kenneth muttered quietly, while staring at NB,.

“But Kenneth-kun, that's…”

“Ugh, yeah… That'd be the same as always. Sorry, Kenneth!”

“It's fine. After all, men are flesh and blood.”

“???”

Watching their exchange, Seina sensed a connection to the conversation he'd had with Tennyo the day before.

“Hey, what did you mean by 'NB is fine'?”

“That thing has a transformation function, right? So you use personal data to make it transform… and then… do it!” Kenneth left out the crucial part, but the general meaning came through.

“Seina-kun, you've never used it?”

“Well…”

Seina recalled how NB had once transformed right before his eyes into Amane's alluring body. And just yesterday, he'd seen it transform into Tennyo, albeit only for a moment.

“No, I haven't been using it. Well… they actually said they’d give me personal data so I could use it…!!”

As soon as he said that, Kenneth and Rajau's eyes lit up and they rushed towards Seina, like large, gleeful dogs pounced on their owner.

“W-Wait, could it be Amane-sensei!? Or Kiriko-sensei?”

“If it's those two's personal data, they don't need to be in the flesh, right?”

“No, it's someone else!” Seina shouted, pushing them back.

Suddenly, their momentum vanished, “Tch, what a letdown~”

Kenneth melted back onto the bench, and Rajau sat back down, looking disappointed.

“A few people asked me if I wanted to use their personal data… but for me, that was a bit strange…”

“They just want you to blow off steam, right? Saying it'll interfere with your studies or something.”

“I kinda get what they mean. It's like being told to do something with a photo of someone

back on Earth.”

Kenneth and Rajau stared intently at Seina as he spoke shyly, but gradually, displeasure began to show in their eyes.

“Seina-kun… I understand you're being insensitive due to your probability bias… but do you even understand what you're saying?”

“Huh?”

“How dare you say that in front of us, when we are hurting…” Kenneth glared at him, eyes brimming with tears.

“Huh??”

“Dammit!!! It's because they like you! Giving someone your personal data is something you can only say if you really like them! I, for one, have never had such a happy event in my entire life…”

“Me too… My aunt asked her friend to… Kuku! …I don't want pity! I don't want pity!” Rajau clenched his fists and began to tear up.

“…So Rajau, is this aunt's friend… pretty?”

“You can do some serious data modifications to personal data…”

“I see… I get it! I totally get it, Rajau!”

The two of them were crying with their arms around each other's shoulders—well, actually, Seina had joined them too… Amidst the curious stares of the people around them, Seina was pondering how to stop them.

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It took about thirty minutes for Kenneth and Rajau to stop crying and for the crowd to disperse.

“Well, it's about releasing pent-up desires and learning how to treat women properly. Fundamentally, the man takes the lead. But for minors, ethical character software is attached to the personal data's character…”

“If you get a little rough or violent, you get corrected. This isn't a school class! Getting interrupted like that midway would totally kill the mood!”

“Ultimately, even if the personal data AI is programmed fairly sophisticatedly, you quickly start to see predictable patterns.”

“Be gentle, be moody, make it feel good… Women just push their own convenience onto us! If you're constantly forced to conform to uniform values, there's no way you can improve.”

“That's why they say you improve faster with real people…”

Rajau leaned closer to Seina and said, “Well, that's more like superstition. And Kenneth-kun's views are extreme, so you should take what he says with a grain of salt. Personal data AI for women has similar ethical software installed as the male versions.”

“Ah, right. Rajau is considered an adult now…”

“Still, the basic variation is monotonous, so I really want to change appearance data.” Rajau said, smiling wryly as he turned away from Seina.

In other words, Tennyo and the others were trying to give him their personal data as a parental gesture (?) to make sure he mastered the basics so he wouldn't get bored with the monotonous basic variation.

(Though actively trying to hand it over like that might be a bit unusual.) Seina came to that conclusion for the time being.

“…Hey, so did you end up taking that personal data?”

“I didn't take it. I just didn't really understand that way of thinking in this world.”

“What a waste… So who was it that offered to give it to you?” Kenneth, who had been lying down, sat up with an interested expression.

“I can't exactly tell you that, can I?”

“Besides Amane-sensei and Kiriko-sensei… Could it have been Chairman Airi?”

“Huh!?”

“Oh, you got it? Ahahahaha! Well, if someone like that offered it to me, I'd refuse. If I got something like that… Guhhh!!”

An uppercut from NB slammed into Kenneth's jaw as he laughed.

Thud! Kenneth fell dramatically backward off the bench.

“What the hell are you doing, you ball-shaped thing!?”

“Who the hell are you calling 'thing'?! Airi-san is a… a woman, you know!”

“A woman? Are you serious?”

“Ah, Kenneth-kun. This NB was made in Chairman Airi's workshop, so probably…” Rajau spoke soothingly to Kenneth, who was lashing out at the NB.

“Whoa~~~, that's nasty! Did she program it to react to insults about it?”

“I'm just stating the facts! Airi-san is beautiful and smart…”

“Beautiful and smart… Well, I'll admit that. You're definitely right about that part…”

“But her personality is so completely out of control it more than ruins those good points.”

“……”

Kenneth, Rajau, and Seina all nodded deeply in agreement. Hearing Seina and the boys conversation, snickers could be heard leaking out from those around them. Unable to refute Rajau's opinion in that situation, NB fell into a sullen silence.

“So, what do we do now? Should we try a little harder?” Rajau reached out a hand to the fallen Kenneth.

Kenneth grabbed it and staggered to his feet, then slumped wearily onto the bench and began to glare intently at the sulking NB.

“Sigh… Maybe it's fine to just go with NB after all?”

“Kenneth-kun?”

“I'm pretty sure I put a lot of my and Rajau's secret collections into NB… Come to think of it, NB's surface material is the same as that giant android porn actress from my personal stash of erotic files.”

“I see… It's far more high-performance than the usual ones…”

Stared at by the two of them with their libidos fully unleashed, the sulking NB recoiled in surprise.

“Wh-what the hell, you guys… Don't stare at me like that!”

“Jiiiiiiiii” **(TN: Japanese SFX for staring)**

Kenneth and Rajau pressed closer to NB.

“Aaah, fine, fine, I get it. Well, I don't really care… but you guys, is that okay? What about your pride as men?”

“Say whatever you want! At this point, it's fine!”

“Come to think of it, getting to test the latest tech firsthand is a dream come true! Hey, Seina-kun!”

The two of them, wearing expressions that couldn't be called normal, now pressed Seina.

“Huh!?… But, but Kenneth and Rajau’s data was found by Kiriko-san and the others and was deleted…”

“Wh-What!? All of it!?”

“…Yeah. All of it.”

Ultimately, Seina deleted everything, but either way, the illegal personal data Kenneth and Rajau were trying to use had already been deleted when Elma checked it, so it was the same result.

“Dammit! Then I'll just access my server now and reinstall it…”

“Ah, that won't work. Since it's officially activated, there's an installation restriction because the owner is a minor, and any illegal software installed before should be marked for deletion. But the Ethics Committee-recommended basic software 'Hello, Little Kitten' should be fine.”

“What the hell good is using that crap now?!”

“Ah… It's done.”

Hearing NB's explanation, Kenneth and Rajau slumped their shoulders and hung their heads.

(Good thing I deleted Tennyo-san's data)

Just then, it happened. From the terrace directly above Seina and the boys, angry shouts and screams could be heard, along with the rustling of leaves.

(Oh, no.)

The instant Seina thought that, a tremendous shock hit him, and he lost consciousness.

“……Huh?”

When Seina woke up, a woman was staring intently at him. She was the woman who had appeared in the room where Seina had undergone his physical examination yesterday. Of course, Seina himself had no way of knowing that. Still confused, he looked around, trying to avoid looking at her.

What he realized was that he was lying on a bed in some hotel room, that the woman peering down at him had her legs wrapped around Seina and was leaning heavily on top of him, and that something plump and protruding was pressed against him.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” The woman placed her right hand on Seina's cheek, forcing him to face her.

“I'm… I'm fine… More importantly, could you please move aside? Um…”

Ignoring Seina's hesitant words, the woman continued to stare intently at him. The pressure points where her weight was applied were so precise that Seina couldn't even shift his body, let alone get up.

“Um… Could you be from the Kuramitsu family?”

Seina desperately tried to keep the conversation going, hoping to find a way out. Frankly, when it came to beauty or allure, he had some tolerance thanks to Amane and Gyokuren. But this woman before him possessed something different from them—a soft, sensual presence, an aura, an allure that intensely stimulated Seina. Amane triggered his “old man” instincts, Gyokuren his fear, both awakening his trouble-avoidance reflexes. But with this woman… none of that worked.

(She's… a natural.) Seina sensed it instantly. That terrifying ability that bypassed the crisis-avoidance filters Mitoto and Mihoshi possessed.

“Um, excuse me!”

He raised his voice slightly to get her attention, but the woman seemed deep in thought, showing no sign of looking Seina's way.

“……Hm? Oh, sorry.”

Just as Seina's instincts were about to explode and it looked like he might cry, the woman finally noticed. She slowly and gracefully moved away from Seina and sat down on a nearby chair. Released, Seina quickly sat up, pulled the thin, soft-to-the-touch quilt toward him to cover himself, and put distance between himself and the woman.

“Ahhhhh, um! Where is this place, and who are you?”

“You're a boy, after all. There's no need to be embarrassed. It was a position that could lead to that, after all.” Ignoring Seina's question, she grinned and stared at his lower body. “Heh, you could have just pounced on me… You're quite patient, aren't you? Or perhaps I'm not that appealing?”

(She's definitely connected to either Airi-san or Seto-sama.) Seina concluded.

The woman noticed Seina's slightly exasperated expression and her face clouded over.

“…I don't want you to dislike me. Let me explain the situation.” Her expression tightened as she began speaking in a commanding, resonant voice.

“Seina-kun, you fainted because I punched a persistent guy who was trying to pick me up. I don't remember hitting him that hard, but he stumbled and fell, hitting you.”

“I sort of get that part. What I want to know is… Why here? Usually in situations like this, I wake up in a hospital or something. That's the normal pattern, right?”

“Well, we planned for Seina-kun to come here in the first place. NB’s check showed it was just a mild concussion, so there's no need to worry.”

“I see… So, um… What exactly is this place…?” Seina scanned left and right, carefully taking in his surroundings.

No matter how he looked at it, the interior decor could only be described as what Earth people would call a “love hotel.” Of course, that was judging by Earth standards.

(Surely, hotels like this must exist. After all, space is vast.)

“It's exactly the kind of place you're imagining, Seina-kun♡” The woman crushed Seina's faint hope and grinned.

Seina, now able to move again, instinctively tried to dash for the exit. But the woman swiftly blocked his path and embraced him.

“Your reflexes pass muster, but you need to work on concealing your intentions better. And taking the shortest route isn't always best, Seina-kun.” The woman whispered into Seina's ear, her face pressed close as she spoke.

After confirming with her thigh that Seina was immobilized once more, she tossed him back onto the bed.

“Ugh!?”

Seina braced himself, expecting the woman to follow up, pulling up the blanket from earlier closer. But she didn't approach the bed further, instead communicating with someone.

“…How's the situation over there?”

“All targets are within the area. Closing the cage door now. Also, the other one has taken the bait.”

“Hakuren-san?”

It was only audio, but the voice was definitely Hakuren's. If the woman was communicating with her, then he hadn't gotten caught up in some strange trouble. Seina judged this and let out a sigh of relief.

“Got it. Leave the rest to me.” The woman ended the call and looked at Seina with a slightly annoyed expression. “Seeing you look so relieved is kind of annoying, you know.”

“Huh?”

“Well, don't you think? We're still alone together in this room, and you're making that relaxed face?” The woman flopped down next to Seina roughly, striking a provocative pose. “So, what are you gonna do?”

(Damn it! If this were Airi-san, she'd definitely be upset. Someone like her would react the same way.)

At that moment, Seina realized his mistake. And unlike Airi, who might react in a slightly childish way, this womans allure was so potent it literally “wafted” off her. It felt like an oasis glimpsed after wandering a desert for days without water, when consciousness was fading.

“Ahhhhh… um…” He desperately fought the urge to rush forward, craving water.

Up until now, anyone who'd tried this kind of trick on Seina had shown signs of being a bit off in their actions. But with this woman, that aspect was completely natural, dulling Seina's instincts for avoiding danger. Perhaps now that she was laying down he could run to the door, but the thought never crossed Seina's mind.

“Heh heh. I'll forgive you for that face.” Satisfied with the sight of Seina's flushed, sweat-drenched face, the woman smoothly sat up and walked straight out of the room.

“…Phew.”

He didn't understand it, but the danger had definitely passed. Yet within Seina, relief mingled with a sense of disappointment. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Just as he was beginning to settle down, he realized he had absolutely no idea what situation he was in.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now…”

As he headed towards the door where the woman had left, he looked up and saw Suiren sitting right in front of him, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Ugh! Whoa!” Surprised, Seina jumped back and fell off the bed. Luckily, the floor was covered with a soft, furry carpet, so although he did feel a bit of impact, he didn't feel any pain.

“Are you okay?” Suiren hopped over the bed and peered down at Seina with concern.

“Ah, no, I'm fine. I just got caught off guard… no, it was so sudden…”

“I'm sorry I startled you. I did call out a few times, but…”

“It's fine. I was confused myself, not quite sure what was happening. More importantly, Suiren-san, how long have you been here?”

“Ever since Seina-sama woke up.”

“The whole time?” Seina retraced his memories since waking up here, but he couldn't find Suiren in them.

“Yes, the whole time… well…” Suiren showed Seina his folded uniform, looking slightly bashful.

“I was washing this in the bathroom…”

Only then did Seina realize he was wearing something like a yukata.

“Well… I thought it might be more comfortable… The uniform seemed to have some functional issues, and it was stained with ice cream, dust, blood, sweat, cologne, hair gel, and various other things, so I gave it a quick wash.” Suiren said shyly, gently placing the folded uniform in front of Seina before entering the washroom and closing the door.

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(Whew, that was close.)

The woman who had been with Seina moments before fled into another room, leaning against the wall and exhaling heavily. Her face was flushed, and beads of sweat glistened on her skin. Her agitation was even stronger than Seina's earlier reaction.

“What the hell were you doing, leaving me out? Come on, spill it! Or else!!” The Airi voiced NB charged at the woman, pressing his face close to hers and yelling into her ear.

“I didn't do anything.”

“Liar! What? ‘But that's Kiriko-san and the others' role’, right? Hey! Everyone~~~, Kuramitsu Mikami is a lecherous educator who takes advantage of her young body to make advances on her students, you know!” NB Airi shouted to the operators likely listening in the back of the room.

“Yeah! I'll tell them! I'll tell Seto-sama, Mitoto-chan, your brother, Kiriko-chan, everyone!”

(Maybe I should have just gone all the way instead of holding back?) Kuramitsu Mikami, thought while intoxicated by the lingering ache in her heart and body, like embers still smoldering. It was the ache for Seina, an ache she'd been “infected” with by “Widow” whom she'd met out of mere curiosity.

In Mikami's case, she was fully aware of it. If she sought treatment from a mental health professional, it could be gone immediately. Yet, as punishment for meeting Widow out of mere curiosity, and more than that, because she didn't want to erase Widow's existence, and above all, because it felt “pleasant,” she deliberately left it within herself.

“…Mikami-sama~~~”

While Mikami's attention was elsewhere, NB's voice had grown faint and weak. For a moment, Mikami thought it might be a trap set by Airi, but upon noticing NB beginning to transform, she hastily deployed a Secret Field.

“How did you manage to cut off Airi-sama's connection? But you really shouldn't expose that form to others, Kirche-san.”

Looking up with tear-filled, pleading eyes was NB in the form of Kirche.

“Really, with Seina-san… with Seina-san…”

“I see. That explains why Airi-sama switched places so quickly.”

In other words, “If pushing doesn't work, try pulling.” Airi thought Mikami would tell the truth when facing Kirche. After all, Kirche's mannerisms and expressions were exactly like a puppy or kitten in front of someone who loves dogs and cats.

“It's all right, don't worry. I haven't done anything wrong.” Mikami gently placed a hand on Kirche's head. Her eyes held that same gentle, serene look she wore as principal.

“…Yes.” Kirche believed Mikami's words without question, nodding like a relieved child.

Mikami found her so adorable she stroked Kirche's head for a while.

(But Kirche… I have no intention of joining the battle for Seina-kun right now. But in the future, once that conflict is settled, I have no intention of avoiding a path that crosses with his.) She murmured silently to herself. (After all, Seina-kun will undoubtedly undergo high-level adjustments like mine or Airi-sama's…)

If that happened, he could live for an unimaginable span of at least tens of thousands of years. Over that accumulated time, the forms of human connections changed in various ways. Separation was certainly possible, but they might become lovers, spouses, or form even deeper bonds. They might become one mind and body, to the point where confirming each other's presence becomes unnecessary. That was what Tennyo had been trying to explain to Seina.

(Either way, I'm just an observer in this situation now.)

Kirche looked up at Mikami, who was lost in such thoughts, her eyes still glistening with tears.

“Um, Mikami-sama. Actually, I have something I'd like to discuss with you…” She said, approaching her with a look of confusion.

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“Damn you, that sly female fox!” Airi slammed her fist on the desk in the chairman's office and yelled. “I was a fool to expect anything from a little brat like Kirche!”

Glancing sideways at her mother peering irritably at the monitor, Minaho flushed as she communicated with Washu.

“Hmm, I see. So you used Seina-dono as bait to create an opening, then leaked Seina-dono's family information to the spy who's likely infiltrated us.” Washu said with a slightly reproachful tone.

This was because Airi had forgotten to inform Washu that the plan had been accelerated. Moreover, it should have been Airi, not Minaho, who was communicating with Washu here, groveling and apologizing.

“Hmph.” Washu raised her right thumb, then flipped it downward.

Thud! Out of nowhere, a heavy, thick, bell-shaped gold basin struck Airi squarely on the head with a loud bang. She immediately lost consciousness and collapsed face-first onto the desk.

“Sorry for the inconvenience.” Minaho bowed.

“Hmm, so refreshing♡”

“…And so, I'm sorry, but I would like to ask you to protect Seina-kun's family and intercept the enemy.”

“That might be a bit tricky to handle. Crushing them outright would be far simpler… Should we avoid using Ryoko?”

“I'll leave the personnel selection to you.”

“Hmph, well, I'll just have to enjoy myself then.”

“…Speaking of which, what about the girl who was in your shoulder?” Minaho recalled how Washu had previously transformed her shoulder into crystal, sealing Widow's astral.

“Ah, she's in the final stage inside the eggshell.”

“That was quick. She was just on Washu-sama's shoulder not long ago.”

“Confronting her was tough, but I wish we could've talked a bit longer… She was a rare specimen, after all.” Washu stroked her crystallized shoulder regretfully.

“The main unit has also completed its third stage of growth in the culture tank. Once we have all the test data from that prototype ship, we just need to make the final adjustments… and it'll be ready for delivery anytime.”

“!!”

Minaho felt goosebumps rise all over her body. The legendary philosopher Hakubi Washu's new ship—a sister ship to the “Ryo-Ohki,” which possessed power equivalent to Jurai's Imperial Ships and had single-handedly invaded and rampaged through Jurai's homeworld—was about to be born.

“Are you absolutely certain this is safe, Seto-sama?” Minaho sighed and muttered to herself.

“Hahaha, it was Seto-dono who asked me to build the best ship.”

“Myaa!”

Then, Ryo-Ohki appeared, sitting on Washu's shoulder.

“What? What's wrong?”

“Myaa Myaa!”

Ryo-Ohki seemed delighted, trying hard to talk to Washu.

“Hmm hmm… I see, you were greeting that child.”

“That child?”

“Hm? Oh, the eggshell. To Ryo-Ohki, she's like a little sister… Now then, I wonder what kind of child she'll grow up to be.” Holding Ryo-Ohki close, Washu smiled.

“If possible, I'd be happy if she grew up to be a good, obedient child…”

“An obedient, good child, huh?”

That essentially meant someone who would act conveniently for Jurai. Washu smiled meaningfully, with a hint of sarcasm.

“Eh!? But Seina-kun already attracts all sorts of trouble as it is… If the ship becomes a troublemaker too…”

“Seto-dono would be overjoyed, racing through space, while Minaho-dono would be left cleaning up the mess, running around like a headless chicken♪?”

Minaho nodded slightly at the apt, nursery-rhyme-rhyming analogy.

“That'll make it even harder for me to get married.”

“It's strange, isn't it? Do you really want to get married?”

Even to Washu, Minaho possessed the qualities of a good wife and mother. Competent, considerate, and with a gentle demeanor, she was the type liked by both men and women. Yet, her position as Seto's second-in-command remained a barrier. Mediocre men wouldn't approach her, while capable men respected her too much to see her as a woman. Still, Minaho could make the first move herself…

“Of course! I actively pursue marriage when I have free time.”

“So, do you actually have free time?”

“…… No.” Minaho murmured softly in response to Washu's question.

“But hey, there are people who've gone five thousand years without a wife.”

“Citing such an extreme example doesn't exactly comfort me!”

“Ahahaha, true. But isn't it about time Minaho-dono's successor was ready? You don't have to take care of Seto-dono all by yourself. If you just quit and left her, Seto-dono would figure something out, right?”

“Considering the hardships my successor would face, that’s such an irresponsible thing to do…”

“Anyone who'd find that a bother wouldn't be allowed in there in the first place, right? Well, that's just how you should think about it—lightly.”

“If Rea-chan's family has a boy, could we get him?”

“That child has been chosen as the human sacrifice.”

“Ugh, that's right… I'm sorry, I ended up complaining. Since Seina-kun came to the Academy, things have really changed drastically—that's exactly the right way to put it.”

“I'll take care of the enemies properly, so cheer up.”

“Myaa.”

Washu held Ryo-Ohki's front paw, making her wave goodbye before cutting the communication. She doubted Ryo-Ohki understood the conversation, but her beaming smile gently warmed Minaho's slightly heavy heart.

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In the room from earlier, the NB shaped like Kirche and Mikami sat facing each other on the sofa.

“Right, Father sent a public email.”

Public email was like a message board. When you didn't know who you were communicating with, you could post it protected so that only the sender could see it.

“Yes. It said, 'Live as you please now'… So…”

“So?”

“I thought it might be better to meet him and apologize.”

Facing Kirche's solemn tone, Mikami looked away while thinking.

“Was the public email protected?”

“No, it was open access and posted on my father's homepage.”

“I see.”

After Kirche, the idol, disappeared, numerous speculations circulated, sparking a major debate about the cause. But within just a few days, one conclusion emerged: Kirche's creator, her father, had tried to make her “his bride,” and she had run away. The open email was a declaration of relinquishing ownership to deflect public criticism.

(According to Airi-sama’s intel, it seems they have started building a new AI…) She glanced at Kirche.

——He's become tainted by the world, lost his purity… meaning he's lost interest in a woman

taken by another——

Mikami recalled Airi saying this with a laugh. Of course, this didn't represent the entirety of Kirche's creator's humanity. It was also his way of maintaining mental stability after losing both a great achievement and the object of his affection.

Still, Mikami judged it unwise to state the facts plainly. Choosing her words carefully, she said, “Kirche… Children must eventually leave their parents' side. Your father's words mean 'don't ever come back'.“

“Huh!?… Does that mean Father is still angry with me?”

“Once you've flown the nest, you must learn to live on your own. If you falter and come crawling back, that won't do. Of course, your father hasn't come to terms with your leaving either. Accepting it takes an incredibly long time. So, don't upset your father's feelings. Keep looking forward, never back.”

After hearing Mikami's words, Kirche thought for a long time. And then…

“…I understand. Thank you.” She said with a tone that seemed resolved, full of determination.

“By the way, Kirche, I'd like to ask you a question now. Is that okay?”

“Y-yes. What is it?” Kirche looked up, her face tense.

“How's life with Seina-kun? What are you two up to these days? Well, I'm just a little curious. If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to force yourself.”

“Ah… um… well, we've stopped seeing each other every night.”

“Did something happen?”

“No, Seina-san is always so kind to me, and I really enjoy it… but—”

“But?”

I started to think it might be a waste of Seina-san's time…” Kirche looked down thoughtfully for a moment, then looked at Mikami as if she'd made up her mind.

“I'm also Seina-san's NB. I started wondering if there might be other things I could do for him. Fortunately, this NB is very high-performance, so it has plenty of resources, and I can access places storing advanced materials. So…”

“You mean you're studying all sorts of things for Seina-kun's sake?”

That meant she was taking action to live with Seina in the real world someday.

“And I feel a little… sneaky about it… I mean, of course, we meet and talk sometimes…” Kirche said shyly.

“That's a very good idea, Kirche.” Mikami nodded appreciatively, though she felt the point where her path crossed Seina's was growing distant.

Feeling a hint of jealousy toward Kirche, who possessed a loveliness she herself lacked, Mikami checked the operation's progress as if to avoid further conversation.

A total of 35 targets had been drawn to Seina, and all of them had been captured.

“Perfect timing. Kirche, you should head back to the outer ring dock with Seina-kun now.”

“Yes, understood… Ahh!!” Kirche activated the surveillance monitor, revealing Suiren and Seina embracing.

The next instant, Kirche and Mikami sprinted out of the room.

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“A-are you… okay?”

Seina caught Suiren, who had stumbled over something and fallen, and they both tumbled onto the bed together. This was the moment Kirche and Mikami witnessed.

Unlike Mikami earlier, this time it was an accident. Normally, they would have panicked and pulled apart immediately—that should have been the end of it. But this time, even after NB transformed into a sphere and burst in with Mikami, the two of them… well, Suiren, to be precise, remained clinging to Seina, holding him tightly.

“Hey, Master! What are you doing behind my back, I’m so envious!”

Even as NB shouted, Seina just stared at Suiren with a red face.

“?”

Mikami suddenly grabbed NB and tossed him lightly between Seina and Suiren. Seina, suddenly snapped back to his senses and frantically tried to pull away from Suiren. But Suiren's arms and legs were wrapped around him, preventing him from moving.

“Suiren…san?”

Only then did Seina, NB, and Mikami realize Suiren had fainted from sheer embarrassment.

“Good grief. Leave her to me for now. Seina-kun, you should head back.”

“Ah, um… Please take care of Suiren-san.” Seina bowed to Mikami and tried to leave the room with NB, but… “Oh! Um, I haven't asked your name…” Seina said as he suddenly turned back to Mikami.

Truthfully, she wanted to reveal it in a more seductive situation, thoroughly enjoying Seina's reaction. But if she didn't say her name now, it would raise strange suspicions in Airi, Kirche, and whoever was likely monitoring this room right now—or even Kiriko and the others if

they got wind of it.

Mikami hesitated slightly, but then smiled brightly at Seina and said, “I would've preferred to say it at a more interesting moment, though. …My name is Kuramitsu Mikami.”

“Kuramitsu, Mikami!? But… but that means…”

“This is my true body. You can understand that just by looking at Airi-sama and Seto-sama, right?” Spreading her arms wide and thrusting out her chest, Mikami proudly displayed her own body to Seina.

“Ah, no, that's true, but…” Seina flushed bright red and flustered.

Seina flushed bright red and became flustered. Mikami's words and actions were unimaginable coming from that Mikami—the usually gentle, rational, ideal educator.

Are you disappointed?”

“Not at all… but then again, if you're going to say that, then Airi-sama too—”

That meant public duties and private life were separate. Hearing this, Mikami beamed and laughed loudly.

“Ahahahaha~~~ Well, I'm glad you think so. Hey, Seina-kun, when you underwent Bio-Enhancement, how did it compare to your old body? Or when you recovered from illness or injury? It's the same thing. When you go from an old person's body to this one, you just can't help but get excited.”

“I kind of get it.”

“Hehe, but keep this between us, okay?” Mikami pressed her index finger to her lips and winked. It was a captivatingly alluring sight.

“Come on, Master. Let's go.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Seina, reluctant to leave Mikami's alluring presence, was pushed out of the room by NB.

By the time NB and Seina returned to the park where he'd passed out, the sun was already beginning to set. On the bench, Kenneth and Rajau sat, exhausted, staring at the sunset.

“Looks like you guys got rejected hard,” In his usual insensitive tone, NB rubbed salt into their wounds.

“Seina-kun's got it made, huh… enjoying himself with that lovely lady.” Kenneth spoke with a sharp edge, still watching the sunset. Normally, he'd be prying for details, but they must have been utterly drained.

Not just Kenneth, but Rajau too sat slumped in silence, drained of energy.

“Nothing really happened. I was unconscious the whole time, right, NB?”

“Yeah, that's about it. So cheer up.”

Just as NB said that, the sound of bells echoed through the town. It was the signal that this district was plunging into the nighttime hours. From this moment on, the nighttime festivities would slowly begin, but for Seina and the boys today, it meant the end of their holiday.

“Ah, if only Seina could have taken one more night off, it would have been our reason to stay out…”

If Captain Seina requested it, the dorm would grant Kenneth and Rajau permission to stay out. But Seina's leave ended this evening. Naturally, the boys had to return to the dorm.

“It can't be helped. Let's just hope Seina-kun gets a longer break next time.”

“Or worse, it might end up being after the training period is over.”

Gazing up at the city where streetlights were beginning to glow, Seina and the boys headed toward the parking lot. Taking the opposite route from their morning arrival, Seina returned to the outer ring dormitory in less than an hour.

Upon entering the living room, the blinds automatically began to open. Seina collapsed onto the sofa illuminated by the light and stretched out fully. Glancing casually at the clock, it was still early evening.

“…Still time before dinner.”

“There's a time difference, you know. Should we adjust?”

“No need. I'm already used to the time here anyway.”

Seina sat up, his eyes taking in the fully opened blinds and the brightly lit, spacious living room. It was luxurious and expansive, though not quite as grand as Amane's penthouse.

“…What is this room? NB, are you sure this is my room?”

“Well, Master is the captain, after all. This is pretty standard.”

“Is it really okay for me… to live in such luxury?”

His current captaincy was merely a special exception during training. Logically, after graduating from GP Academy, he'd undoubtedly start as a regular crew member.

“Maybe it would be better to ask for a regular crew member's room.”

“Kamidake is a classified test ship. We need surveillance and escorts. Well, you could also say we're isolating Captain Master from others.”

“It's a luxurious cage, isn't it?”

“If it bothers you that much, try not to accumulate too many things, so you can handle being in a cramped space.”

“…Yeah. For now, I'll take a bath before dinner…!!”

Seina stood up from the sofa and stared speechless at the view through the open shuttered window.

The previous night, he hadn't even bothered to open the window shutters, heading straight to the bedroom to sleep. He hadn't had the chance to realize what kind of place had been assigned to him.

“Oh, the world of science fiction…”

A massive outer ring intersected the pitch-black universe, while below lay layered buildings, waterways with waterfalls, and countless trees and flowers in full bloom. He couldn't even begin to imagine how much time it would take to create such a landscape on Earth. When Seina first came to the Academy, it felt like gazing up at the city's colossal structures, but this time it was more like looking down from the summit of a high mountain at an ideal living space in space.

Of course, that breathtaking view could also be seen from the spacious bathroom. Having unexpectedly lingered in the bath, Seina collapsed onto the bed, robe still draped over his shoulders.

“Are you okay, Master?”

“…Ugh… It's a luxury hangover.”

“What kind of drunk is that?”

“But today was eventful… I never imagined Principal Mikami would be like that…”

Seina lay on his back in bed, recalling Mikami's appearance. The young, beautiful, vibrant figure and the familiar principal he always saw—though their ages were worlds apart, with almost nothing in common, he remembered their eyes resembled each other slightly when she smiled faintly.

“Mikami-san said it herself, didn't she? Unlike the planet where you were born, appearance here isn't tied to age. If you wish, you can change your looks, even your gender. Though for the last few hundred years, growing up as you were born has become the norm, or rather, common sense. Only perverts or country bumpkins need to fixate on youth—or people doing jobs like Mikami-san or Airi-san.”

“Hmmm… Is that so…”

“I think you'll get an offer to freeze your age soon too, Master.”

“Me?”

“There's an age suited for judgment, action, and fighting, right?”

“Ah, I see…”

“More importantly, Master, when you were hugging Suiren-san… what were you thinking?”

“Huh!?”

After Suiren collapsed onto him, Seina couldn't move not just because Suiren had wrapped her limbs around him. Of course, Suiren taking such an action itself was unexpected and startled him, but there was another reason Seina was surprised.

Suiren had a surprisingly non-existent presence. It wasn't that she was faint like a shadow; you could recognize she was there, but she lacked any human warmth or vitality. It was like looking at a TV left on but not being watched.

(…But back then) Seina stared intently at his own hands. (The texture I felt then, the warmth, the breath, the heartbeat, the scent…)

The sensation lingering on Seina's hand was unmistakably human. Precisely because it was usually so faint, this sudden encounter felt incredibly vivid and shocking. Moreover, as befitting a lady-in-waiting to Seto, she possessed a figure that rivaled any of the other girls.

“Does she have a good body?” NB muttered, as Seina blushed and squirmed.

“Shut up! It's none of your business!”

“Whatever. I'll ask for the details later anyway.”

“I'm not telling you later or even now!”

Seina shot upright and glared at NB, just as Kiriko appeared on the monitor in front of him.

“Seina-chan. It's almost dinner time, but… before that, I have something I'd like to ask you. Is that okay?”

Behind Kiriko, who smiled brightly, Suiren sat on the sofa looking perplexed.

“Aaaaaah… I'll explain everything properly.” Seina answered, sounding resigned.

Chapter Three: Melancholy

That day, Ryoko Balta's pirate ship was undergoing routine maintenance at a civilian repair dock in a sector of space not far from the Academy.

Just as railways have stations, space routes have countless relay points. And just as there

are express, rapid, and local trains, this was a small relay point—though located on the main route —that GP and major scheduled services simply passed through.

“Captain, maintenance will be complete at the scheduled time…” The first officer who entered the captain's quarters stopped his report after noticing Ryoko's troubled expression. “What's wrong?”

“…Huh? Oh, I was just thinking about that new ship model.”

“The one we got intel on from our spy the other day, the ship commanded by Yamada Seina, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Still, I'm impressed you managed to get your hands on that kind of information. The ship was built by Masaki Airi's workshop, right?”

“Did we get it? Or did they let us in?”

“You mean it was intentional?” The first officer wore an expression that said, “Surely not?”

Seeing this, Ryoko gave a wry smile.

“This ship is truly groundbreaking. She’s quite the philosopher from the Academy. And considering it can be mass-produced, the cost-effectiveness is staggering.” As she spoke, a 3D model of the “Kamidake” appeared on the monitor.

“But this ship isn't meant for single-ship operations… Of course, it has ample capability for that, but fundamentally, it's a vessel designed to combine the roles of a fighter and a destroyer during fleet operations.”

“Indeed, it is a rather compact vessel.”

“Compared to the standard vessels supplied by the Da Ruma Guild, it's only about thirty percent of their size, and twenty-five percent of our own ships. The problem is that Kamidake is self-contained within this size and shape.”

At Ryoko's words, the first officer looked slightly puzzled.

“Using this as a single ship is quite difficult. It's fine for raids, but the real problem comes when we actually acquire loot. See, most cargo is detached in container units, right? Trying to connect containers of the standard GP size to the Kamidake…”

A container appeared beside Kamidake. It was roughly twice as long as Kamidake.

“This thing… towing with it might be a bit tricky.”

Containers varied from empty to fully loaded, and then there was the issue of the contents' density. Kamidake's capabilities were certainly sufficient to carry it and make a hyperspace jump, but with such a size difference, achieving a safe and precise hyperspace jump would be difficult without calculating the weight distribution fairly accurately. Moreover, even if they acquired the prize, pursuing ships or reinforcements were highly likely to arrive. That's why measuring the container must be completed within a short timeframe.

“Not just GP containers, but about 80% of standard containers are this size. And the lack of engines compatible with this unusual hull shape is also a problem.”

Kamidake's blueprints contained no engine data.

“I couldn't get the engineering blueprints, so we'll have to substitute with what we can get our hands on… but with what fits in this space, combat might be a bit… challenging.”

“There seems to be some leeway in the internal structure. Couldn't we fit something a bit larger?”

“If we do that, operating as a single ship becomes even more impossible. After all, the ship is also our living space.”

“Connect living quarters and detach them only during work.”

“Hmm, that's the logical conclusion, but construction costs would skyrocket. Personnel requirements would also increase—to put it bluntly, we'd need the equivalent of two ships' worth. Prolonged operations would become difficult, inevitably limiting the scope of work we could undertake.”

In fishing terms, it would mean only coastal operations—no deep-sea fishing.

“Quite troublesome… Only large-scale pirates or those targeting small fry could use it.”

“The Kamidake is a groundbreaking ship, but technically, it's not particularly remarkable. Its strength and balance are incredibly impressive, but it only makes sense at this size and shape.”

“So the design technology isn't transferable?”

“Yes. Even the slightest size change could, worst case, require altering the fundamental design itself. We ran some rough calculations, and even minor size adjustments would make standard Federation-sized parts unavailable. You'd have to either modify everything or order custom parts. If you can't use off-the-shelf components, it loses its value as a mass-produced vessel. Ultimately, it becomes a custom-built ship like mine.”

“So it becomes an expensive toy, then.”

“Of course, if we try to maintain the current Kamidake's specs. But…” Saying this, she glared at the Kamidake's 3D diagram with a disgruntled look.

“But if we keep it in this shape, it can withstand a fairly high-power engine. That's right… it can easily withstand the power of the Daidoros.”

“That much!? Is there… no way to make it a more manageable size?”

“We haven't found an answer to that yet… Huh, it's like a nasty puzzle. Either way, with our current technology, we can't miniaturize an engine with Daidoros-class output enough to fit it in this ship. But the Academy has compact high-output engines and space compression technology…”

“I see. So it's completely wasted potential. Is there no way to acquire that kind of technology?”

“The defenses are incredibly solid. So far, we haven't even found a foothold. Even if we could obtain that information, we'd still need the technology to manufacture it and the technology to build the plants to produce it.”

“If it's mass-produced, won't used or diverted units eventually find their way over here?”

“It's Jurai's next-generation flagship. Don't get your hopes up.”

“…A ship effective for the enemy but unusable for us… Troublesome.”

“Yes… no, it could become even more troublesome.” Ryoko's expression grew even more stern.

“What do you mean?”

“Have you forgotten? Jurai has that incredible energy generator and computer unit, right?”

“Royal Trees… But that's far beyond… anything Daidoros could match.”

“It might be impossible for the upper generations, but for the lower ones—the fourth generation and beyond—it should be perfectly feasible to install, don't you think? Jurai's official statement claims the fourth generation and beyond have a low probability of fruition, but I doubt that's true. I believe there are quite a few of them.”

“This is urgent. We need to inform upper management immediately…”

“We need to investigate their intentions a bit more. Besides, since Yamada Seina-kun is doing the bug checks for us, it's fine to wait until that's finished. With mass-produced ships like these, minor changes can drastically alter the design. Instead, once our ship's maintenance is complete, let's take it out for a test run and get some work done. I could use some exercise myself after all this time.” Ryoko said, trying to change her mood, as she stretched.

“Several job requests have come in. Please check them later.”

“Got it.”

A dozen hours later, Ryoko Balta was attacking a GP transport convoy alongside a joint pirate fleet.

“Energy reaction detected in forward space!”

Pirates sometimes formed fleets by gathering several groups depending on their target. Usually, the pirate who gathered the intelligence on the prey led the group. Therefore, Ryoko did not hold command of this fleet.

However, transport caravans of that scale often had official escort ships, making attacks rare. Fortunately or unfortunately for the pirates, the boom in logistics following Seina's mass pirate arrests had led to a shortage of escort ships.

“Thirty medium-sized civilian transport ships, two escort vessels confirmed! Command ship and five escort vessels engaged. Initiating attack.”

This pirate fleet numbered twenty ships. If they could sink the escort vessels in a surprise attack, or at least inflict significant damage, the battle would be decided—that was Ryoko's thought as she listened to her second-in-command's report.

“The transport ships are separating! They're decoy ships!”

“What!?”

“Ship silhouette confirmed, it’s Kamidake! Kamidake, jump!”

The moment Ryoko recognized her first officer’s near-scream, the Kamidake completed an ultra-short-range jump, appearing alongside the flank of the fleet that had advanced for the assault.

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“Enemy at three o'clock! Evade!”

“You idiot! Keep charging at full speed! If we're not running parallel, they won't hit us that easily!”

But the next instant, a massive impact struck the command ship's bridge.

“Damn it! Where did we get hit!?”

“Direct hit on the engine block! Damn it, it penetrated right up to the final armor plate!”

“Where's he gone?”

“Towards the reserve fleet in the rear! All ships except this one have had their main engine sections hit, causing a loss of thrust.”

“In that one instant!?”

“Boss! The escort ship fired! Impact in two seconds!”

“Evade now… Dammit!”

The moment they were distracted by Kamidake's surprise attack, not only the escort ships but also the transport ships began attacking the pirate vessels. An even brighter flash and stronger shockwave struck the pirate command ship than before.

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“Kamidake approaching!”

“Has the command ship sent the disband signal?”

“Not yet.”

“I see…”

Ryoko made no effort to hide her displeasure. Once a fleet was formed, the flagship's orders were absolute. But that flagship was separated from the main force, taking concentrated enemy fire. In their current positions, immobilized sister ships were obstructing their ability to provide covering fire. Even if they tried to move out of range of enemy fire, Kamidake was closing in.

(Any ship attempting to move would likely be attacked.)

Moreover, even moving to provide support was becoming increasingly pointless. For pirates untrained in fleet operations, the best course of action now was to break formation and create a situation where each ship could escape based on its own judgment.

“Prioritize defense! Don't think about counterattacks!”

“Disperse signal from the flagship!”

“Too slow! Dodge the first attack and then make an emergency jump!”

“Here they come!”

Kamidake dodged the pirate ships' attacks with what could be called artistic, frequent jumps, then charged in.

“Brace for impact!”

Kamidake's attack sent Ryoko's ship reeling violently, damage alarms wailing like screams throughout the vessel.

“Hyperspace jump, can we make it!?”

“Hold on a second…”

The battle-hardened operators calmly and swiftly severed damaged sections to minimize jump damage. They rerouted circuits while gathering energy for the hyperspace jump.

“Kamidake’s second attack is coming!”

“Captain, we're ready to jump!”

“Jump!”

At Ryoko's signal, her ship vanished into hyperspace. Kamidake's second attack passed through just an instant later.

“Fortunately, the ship's damage was repairable within a day…”

Ryoko's ship was once again housed in the civilian dockyard where it had undergone maintenance yesterday.

“…However, it seems only four ships, including this one, managed to escape safely.”

In Ryoko's private quarters, her first officer finished his report and let out a deep sigh.

“Still, to encounter them so suddenly… What an incredibly powerful ship. With that kind of performance, wouldn't it be usable even with slightly reduced engine output?”

“…Take a look.”

Ryoko enlarged the combat log from earlier. All of Kamidake's attacks against the command fleet had struck directly near the engine units.

“Well, impressive even for an enemy. To hit almost without fail in such a difficult situation…”

“The problem is the firepower level of Kamidake's mounted weapons. Here, these are the armor specs for each ship.” Ryoko input the detailed damage data for each ship one after another.

“This… It's less powerful than I expected… No, given the size of this ship, it's still quite powerful, but…?”

“It doesn't match your impression of the attack, does it? That's because every hit landed on a vital point. Kamidake's helmsman is Masaki Kiriko and the gunner is Amane Kaunaq. The other crew members aboard that ship… are probably subordinates of the Demon Princess.”

“So that ability belongs to the pilot?”

“What do you think? You encountered Jurai's fleet when you were young, didn't you?”

“Uh, yeah…”

It was a chilling memory to recall even now. A pirate fleet exceeding a hundred ships had been utterly destroyed by just twenty-one Juraian vessels. Moreover, all ships except the flagship were small Kamidake size vessels.

“The command ship that charged in first disrupted our movements. We were picked off one by one, divided into four teams of five ships each. The Demon Princess's subordinate was aboard the command ship … Indeed, I felt a similar… no, even greater pressure from the Kamidake.”

“Kamidake's firepower and maneuverability are within the specs estimated from the data.” Ryoko said casually, but that was only possible because she had Kamidake's design data. Without it, the performance would be bewildering.

“So, does that mean they exceeded Kamidake's performance limits?”

“I doubt there are many people capable of that kind of maneuvering and firing. So, as we initially predicted, it wasn't designed for single-ship operations, but for fleet operations. That said, the current Kamidake is undergoing single-ship operational testing, so it has a balanced equipment configuration. But if it were specialized for attack, its firepower would be even greater. That's the advantage of a fleet.”

It was unclear how powerful the new ships being deployed would be, but even if their performance limits were lower than Kamidake's, they would be able to toy with 30 pirate ships and attack in groups. Moreover, if Jurai, who has a reputation for combination combat, used them, it was impossible to imagine how powerful they wcould be.

“The small Juraian ships I encountered years ago were far inferior in specs compared to Kamidake. If those small ships were equivalent to Kamidake now, even two teams could have annihilated that entire fleet… We absolutely must send Kamidake's data to headquarters immediately!” The pale-faced first officer looked at Ryoko with pleading eyes, grasping at the gravity of the situation.

“……”Hearing those words, Ryoko suddenly felt something catch in her mind and fell deep in thought.

“Captain?”

“Something's bothering me. I don't like this.” Ryoko rose irritably, crossed her arms, and began pacing.

“Ever since Elma was called for Kamidake's final inspection, the gap in surveillance caused by the security changes under Yamada Seina's escort… It's all too convenient. Of course, with mass-produced standard ships, it was only a matter of time before some information leaked…”

“…What does Elma say about this?”

“She said it was calculated, that a little information leaking out would ease other nations' fears… Well, I suppose they plan to supply the downgraded spec ships to other countries too. But that's strictly for allies. We're clearly enemies, after all.”

“Do you think Elma's identity is already known?”

“Well, given who we're dealing with… Hey, if we get Kamidake's exterior data, how do you think upper management will react?”

“I was thinking, if we want to take advantage of this ship's advantages, why not use it first on the Big Da Ruma? There's an escort fleet there…”

“Yes, that's the best use for it…!! Right, that's it!” Suddenly Ryoko turned to her first officer and pointed.

The first officer was delighted to see a use for the acquired information, but Ryoko's displeased expression told him it was a mistake.

“Kamidake has many parts that need to be machined into special shapes, and requires a lot of specialized precision machining equipment! Of course, this is not unusual for a new model, but…” Ryoko quickly checked the manufacturers of these devices.

“Just as I thought…”

The monitor Ryoko glared at displayed the manufacturers of that equipment.

“…Only five companies?”

“It's not just that… The building materials used are the same. The wide variety of alloys used in each part also have a limited number of suppliers handling them.”

“If they focus their surveillance there…”

The first officer shuddered upon realizing the ingeniously woven net. Especially if the opponent was Jurai and the Demon Princess.

“They know what they're building… Fluctuations in material deliveries or product shipments would immediately reveal our actions. With surveillance conditions this narrow, no matter how we disguise the transfers, eventually they'll pinpoint the Big Da Ruma… the Guild's headquarters.”

“So this ship's data is the decoy? Still, using the data of the next-generation flagship as bait… But either way, I think we have no choice but to leave the decision to higher-ups?”

“This data will be destroyed.”

“But if that becomes known, the captain's position will be compromised!”

“A philosopher's job is essentially that of a coordinator—combining scattered technologies to create new applications. The Juraian next-generation flagship… The technologies used aren't particularly valuable, but the result is a groundbreaking ship. Masaki Airi really outdid herself.”

“Captain?”

Unable to discern the intent behind her words, the first officer stared at Ryoko with a look

of confusion.

“Don't you understand? Kamidake isn't particularly important data to the enemy. The purpose of the earlier battle was to prevent them from realizing that.”

“…Indeed, if shown that, I'd want to find a way to use it, even if it's somewhat cumbersome…”

With only two escort ships, and even accounting for the transport ship's attack, they pushed thirty combat pirate ships to near annihilation.

“You know this too, don't you? Among Da Ruma's leadership, there are quite a few former members of guilds destroyed by Jurai. If they can make Jurai eat their words, they'd likely be willing to take on some risk and push forward with it …”

“A matter of pride, then… That's certainly a strong possibility.”

The Da Ruma Guild was built from scratch by its leader, Da Ruma. While powerful, it was a collection of individuals drawn together by various motives, lacking any unified will. Even the charisma of Supreme Leader Da Ruma had been fading lately in the face of the guild's own immense growth. What kept the organization together now was nothing more than the ambitions of factions and their leaders; there was no solid foundation as an institution. Within such an organization, it was highly likely that Da Ruma himself would seek to stabilize his own position and pursue that power.

“Besides, some of them just get a kick out of the risk.”

“Tarrant…”

“After Yamada Seina captured so many pirates, we're seriously lacking in military strength. It would be good if that led to more caution, but if we build new ships and expand our military strength, the organization will split.”

At Ryoko's words, the first officer finally sighed as if giving up. Few realized it, but what sustained the Da Ruma Guild was the mystique surrounding its headquarters, the Big Da Ruma, which had never been captured.

“Come to think of it… maybe we should have eliminated Yamada Seina back then.”

“If we get flustered and lose our composure, that guy will make us easy prey.”

“He really is a troublesome opponent.”

“The one most affected by that power is himself. Elma's report mentioned that when the data recording Yamada Seina's day was shown to the hazard countermeasures expert team, they turned pale.”

“Was it that bad?”

“It was so incredible, they initially thought it was staged. But they realized it would be

impossible to do that intentionally, so they concluded it was genuine. His daily life involves quite a lot of bad luck, yet the damage is surprisingly minimal."

"What do you mean? The experts turned pale…"

"They analyzed his casual actions in minute detail and predicted the outcomes… In just one day, there were 856 cases where injuries would have been minor and 688 where they would have been severe."

"……"

"He avoids all of them without even realizing it. But conversely, there were 32 cases where he got injured in situations where accidents seemed unlikely."

"…I don't know how to describe it, but… that's incredible. We were just caught up in his bad luck, weren't we?"

"Exactly. To put it bluntly, staying away is best. Well, I digress… Actually, the most essential general-purpose ship for the Guild might be the Daidoros."

"Captain!"

"…Sorry." Ryoko apologized with a solemn expression, like a child scolded by her father.

Within the Guild, Daidoros was an unspoken taboo. Many executives had proposed mass-producing Daidoros, but each time, the proposing executive was either captured by the GP or died in a mysterious accident.

"Why not just…" Ryoko started to voice a possibility, but realizing it was utterly impossible, she shook her head vigorously to stop herself.

"Anyway, let's get to work. We've had some unexpected expenses." Ryoko forced herself to sound cheerful. But…

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The bridge of Ryoko's ship was enveloped in quiet tension.

"Jumpout vibrations detected! Very close!"

The forecaster's expression relaxed at the operator's voice. Captains who determine routes had various quirks. Of course, they tried to avoid patterns, but captains who went long periods without accidents or pirate attacks could gradually develop monotonous route settings. The forecaster collected such information to predict routes. But encountering a jumpout at the exact moment was extremely rare.

"Well done! Captain, based on the energy-to-mass ratio, it's definitely the target GP cargo ship!"

"Alright, prepare for capture!" Ryoko said with a smile when she received her first officer's

report and that seemed cheerful even amid the tension.

The very next moment, the ship that jumped out after the target GP vessel was Kamidake.

“Ka-Kamidake!?”

“Captain! Gravity detection, more jumping out!”

Overlapping Ryoko's startled voice, the operator shouted as pirate ships pursuing the same target jumped out one after another in front of Ryoko's ship.

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“Why? Why? We took every precaution gathering intel, carefully choosing a sector where Yamada Seina absolutely couldn't be…” Ryoko Balta's voice held no strength left; she slumped deeply into her chair, utterly exhausted.

This was the fifth time in the past month she'd entered the dock for repairs. And every single one was due to battle when she encountered Kamidake.

“…Fortunately, all the damage this time is minor. They say repairs will be completed within a day.”

“Fortunately?” Uncharacteristically, Ryoko glared at her first officer with displeasure.

“My apologies, that was an inappropriate remark.”

“Fine… It's far better than being told kindly by the repair shop owner, 'I’ll put it on your tab'.“

“…Sigh.”

Hearing Ryoko's words, the first officer hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should bring up the next matter. But he decided it wasn't good to leave the air stagnant like this.

“Actually, I got a job offer from that repair shop…”

“Job offer?”

“Yes, it's… a part-time job as a transport crew for the GP.”

“……”

Ryoko felt truly heartbroken. If no one else had been there, she would have wanted to cry out loud, it hurt so much. To hide it, Ryoko abruptly stood up from her chair, grabbed a cushion, swung it around, and slammed it down.

“I have money! I have enough to pay cash upfront for repairs like this a hundred times over, two hundred times over!”

“Captain, what the repairman means is that we should take a break until our luck turns

around, right?”

At the first officer's words, Ryoko stopped dead.

“Right. That's one solution. But… working part-time for the GP is a bit too much of a joke.”

“They're doing quite well these days.”

Surprisingly, pirates sometimes worked for the GP undercover. Of course, it was limited to delivery services, but even if your background was somewhat shady, once you were registered and showed a serious work ethic, they didn't pry too much into your past afterward. It was a job with raises and good pay. Some pirates even ended up getting hired permanently.

“Well, look at the state we're in. Fine, I'll grant permission for reconnaissance purposes. Work hard and bring back as much money as you can from the GP… Hm?” Ryoko noticed a direct communication coming in and signaled her deputy with her eyes to step out. “Excuse me.”

As the first officer bowed and left, the room was instantly cloaked by a secret wall, plunging into darkness, and Komachi Kyō appeared.

“Ryoko, an emergency executive meeting has been called. It's in three hours.”

“Could it be…”

“It's about that boy, isn't it?”

With that, Komachi vanished.

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“…Huh? What's wrong?”

As the first officer came out of Ryoko's room, he noticed Ranba, a bridge officer, watching them.

“!”

Ranba tried to flee, but stopped after a few steps, trembling as he looked at the first officer. Seeing his unusual state, the first officer, though startled, spoke in a gentle tone.

“What's wrong? What happened?”

Ranba was moved to tears by those kind words and collapsed to the ground.

The space was filled with a starry sky, making it seem as if the Guild was floating in space. Three-dimensional images of the Guild's executives were lined up in a large U-shape, with the chairman in front and, behind him, the giant silhouette of Da Ruma, the leader of the

Guild.

“Far from decreasing, the casualties seem to be mounting?” Da Ruma's deep, resonant voice, like a great bell, echoed through the space.

Though slightly weakened, the Supreme Commander's authority was still undeniable.

“Yes… we've prepared various countermeasures… but given that it's something as uncertain as a power that attracts pirates, well…” The executive handling Seina countermeasures said while wiping away sweat like a low-ranking official.

“It sounds like occult nonsense, but there's also the example of Kuramitsu Mitoto.”

“Come to think of it, Tarrant was also involved with Yamada Seina, wasn't he?”

“Hmm, I recall him making quite a spectacle of himself.”

The executives, as if dodging Da Ruma's questioning, all turned toward Tarrant with expressions bordering on scorn, using a tone laced with contempt they would never normally use.

“?”

For a moment, Ryoko didn't recognize the figure standing there as Tarrant. Usually, he'd show up to important meetings wearing thin, inappropriate clothing, his arrogant, condescending attitude practically mocking the occasion. But now, clad in black protective gear, he stood hunched over before the executives like a lowly soldier summoned to their presence.

“Looks like someone gave him a rough time.”

Komachi's words via private communication made Ryoko realize the meaning of Tarrant's protective gear.

“Who on earth did that to him? Could it be the Demon Princess?”

“If it was the Demon Princess, she wouldn't have left him alive. Intelligence says Daidoros was severely damaged, but apparently he didn't suffer any fatal injuries. It seems she deliberately avoided his vital points, as if she were toying with him.”

“Daidoros!? But the only one who could do that is Jurai…”

“Well, we don't know who it was, but it's definitely someone we'd rather not meet.”

While she was concentrating on her conversation with Komachi, the executives continued to ridicule Tarrant.

“I heard he went to the planet where Yamada Seina was born.”

“Oh? So he failed at his specialty—capturing hostages.”

“This information was obtained at the expense of our own intelligence agents.”

“Ugh…”

Tarrant seemed to be able to endure the ridicule of the executives, but he was terrified by the visions of those who had put him through this ordeal. And the presence of Yamada Seina brought back memories of that time. Humiliation, anger, fear - to him, the root of all evil was Yamada Seina. In order to eliminate him, the ridicule of the executives was of no concern.

“Mr. Chairman! I know this is presumptuous of me, but…” Exclaimed the young man standing next to Tarrant.

Normally, no one else was permitted in the executive meeting, but exceptions were made for proxies or assistants to executives when necessary. However, it was rare for such a person to speak directly.

“Very well. I grant you permission to speak.”

“Thank you. Given the situation, I believe the most effective course is to take direct action against Yamada Seina.”

The man's words were met with a chorus of protest from the executives.

“Foolish! His is protected by agents from the Academy and Jurai. How do you propose to assassinate him?”

“Do you know how many people have been arrested for their involvement with him?”

“Wasn't it just recently that Yamada Seina shattered Tarrant's 'Grim Reaper' legend, the one that promised annihilation upon encounter? Have you forgotten that?”

“Or are you suggesting we start an all-out war with the Galactic Federation?”

“Do you have some plan?” The Chairman cut off the executives' remarks.

“It is Ryoko Balta-sama!”

A murmur rippled through the assembly at those words.

“Don't be ridiculous! Imposing your personal grudges on others is utterly disgraceful!”

But Tarrant's subordinate ignored Komachi and continued speaking.

“Ryoko-dono has a trump card, doesn't she… Elma, I believe…”

“!! That is information you have no business knowing!” Komachi shouted, her face flushed with anger.

Elma's existence was top-secret information known only to a select few in upper management.

“Enough! Stop it!” The Chairman glanced at Tarrant, then at Ryoko. “It is indeed the method with the highest probability. What do you say, Ryoko Balta?”

“Let Elma do it.” With those words, the silhouette of Commander Da Ruma rose to his feet.

“Ryoko Balta… I have high expectations.” Da Ruma spoke in a solemn voice, then vanished.

“Haa!”

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The lights came on in the captain's quarters of Ryoko’s ship as the secret wall was lifted, revealing Ryoko, her first officer,and a 3D image of Komachi.

“So Tarrant really did have ulterior motives for attending despite the embarrassment…”

“My apologies. It was my oversight…” The first officer bit his lip.

Before the executive meeting began, the first officer had been informed of a shocking truth by Ranba. He had been spying for Tarrant all along. Of course, it wasn't his own choice; his family had been taken hostage.

Initially, there had been almost no demands for information, but circumstances changed over the past few days. The small colony where Ryoko and her crews’ families lived had been seized, and a certain individual along with several others had been abducted. Upon closer investigation, it became clear that, like Ranba, several others had been turned into spies, and information had been collected and dispersed among multiple sources.

“Attacking a Guild member's colony…”

“Probably because they didn't have any decisive information to threaten me with. At this stage, destroying the new ship's data is something I can easily justify.”

“If that's the case, he must have been pretty angry. The penalty for Elma's information hasn't gone unpunished. If we wait a little longer, he'll probably destroy himself…”

“Komachi-sama, Tarrant's background is far too unknown. Even if he self-destructs, the collateral damage could be significant.”

“True. A man who would kill his own family to save face—after such a blunder, he'd stop at nothing.”

“But what if there's another reason we must act urgently?” Ryoko murmured softly.

“Do you have some idea? A connection to those who were taken?”

“That…” Ryoko faltered, as if hiding something.

“Never mind. It's still dangerous to underestimate him. But it's also true this is a chance to weaken his power. The question is whether the hostages will return if Elma completes her

mission, but…”

Komachi's comment caused Ryoko to frown. Whether the hostages returned depended entirely on Tarrant's whim, but Ryoko was certain they would not come back.

“Having sworn an oath at the meeting, I must complete the mission.”

If she failed to complete her mission, her crew would be the next to suffer.

“I've been secretly approaching several executives. Don't worry, given Tarrant's current state, many will likely cooperate.”

“Please.”

Ryoko and the first officer bowed deeply to Komachi.

“And then… about your crew and their families…”

“I understand. I won't let him have his way any longer. Evacuate everyone to the Big Da Ruma immediately. I'll take responsibility for the rest.”

With that, Komachi's holographic image vanished.

“About Elma… How much does Tarrant know?”

Ryoko collapsed into a chair.

“ … Huo Balta-sama took the entire team with him… He must know everything.”

“So Tarrant's goal was indeed Huo-sama's…”

“Yes, his skills are on par with the Academy's… After all, he was taught by Hakubi Washu herself. Elma became Airi's secretary at the Academy precisely because she was educated by Huo-sama from childhood. But…”

“He was probably looking for an opportunity to take down Ryoko-sama. Tarrant isn’t just a brute.”

“What purpose would ousting me serve? Even though I bear the name Balta, I have no connection whatsoever to the Balta Guild.”

“Tarrant's motives are beyond ordinary people… Simply disliking you is reason enough. And considering he suffered such heavy losses trying to take Yamada Seina's family hostage, perhaps he finds Yamada Seina's very existence intolerable.”

“Maybe… I'm tired today… I'll get some sleep.” Ryoko stood and climbed the spiral staircase leading to her bedroom.

The bedroom, bathed in soft indirect lighting, felt like a spacious attic. Ryoko lazily removed her cloak, armor, boots, and gloves, tossing them into the laundry closet. Finally, she slipped out of her tight-fitting bodysuit.

“Damn it!” she yelled, flinging them into the laundry closet. Without even taking the robe that was hanging in the closet, she collapsed completely naked onto the large bed at the very back, which looked like it was at least six tatami mats wide.

“…Phew…”

She exhaled deeply. Having shed the clothes that had been constricting her and lying down on the bed where she felt most at ease, Ryoko felt her mood settle slightly. Then, in a daze, she gazed at the photos displayed in the large bay window before her—pictures taken with the crew, their families, and people Ryoko knew.

“……Yamada, Seina”

Ryoko's attention suddenly fixed on one of them. Staring intently, she crawled on all fours like an animal toward the bay window. It was the group photo taken earlier, on the way to the Academy, with Seina, Alan, and the others. Amidst the crew members, unusually boisterous, was Seina looking uncomfortable, and Ryoko, watching him with a wry smile.

“…Ah.”

At that moment, Ryoko realized that among all the photos displayed there, the one with Seina was the one where she showed her true feelings and had the most natural expression. As captain, with so many lives to protect, Ryoko had always been battling pressure.

As she stared, Seina's image in the photo began to blur before her eyes.

Bam——Ryoko covered the photo of her and Seina, buried her face in the bed, and began to cry.

“Ugh, ahh… uuuu…”

Ryoko didn't quite understand the meaning of those tears at that moment.

Chapter Four: First Paycheck

“All ships stand down. No anomalies detected in the vicinity.”

“Transitioning from alert level 3 to 2.” The operator's calm voice echoed across the

Kamidake's bridge.

Projected onto the display, three heavily damaged pirate ships drifted amidst a sea of debris. Then, beyond them, a GP ship responding to the Kamidake's call jumped out.

“This is GP3327165, Lester. Taking over the mission.” The familiar female operator of the GP ship said with a smile.

Fighter craft immediately launched from the GP ship and began circling the pirate vessels. After communications confirmed the pirates' surrender, a small transport ship launched from the GP vessel.

“No anomalies on the pirate ship. Prisoner transfer complete.”

“Lester has transitioned to on-site investigation.”

Hearing the operator's report, Seina let out a small sigh of relief.

“3327165, Lester, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“Good work.”

After a brief exchange with Lester's female operator, Kamidake left the scene.

“Alert level lifted. Transitioning to normal mode.”

Kiriko's voice released the bridge from its tension.

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In Kamidake's cafeteria, Alan and the others checked their pay on their mobile terminals.

“Whoa! Holy crap! We're killing it—our salaries have shot way up!”

“Alright! Let's go out and have some fun!”

“Hey Alan, Barry… Check out the balance left after our debt was deducted!”

“Wh-wh-wh- what the hell?!” Alan yelled back, his tone just as intense as before. “What the hell is this? There's barely anything left!”

“Ah, such a nostalgic number… Remember? This is the same amount as our first paycheck. Hahaha.”

“Don't mess with me! That's the money we earned risking our lives in battle! And they just went and used it to pay off your debt without asking!”

For Alan, salary meant money he could spend entirely on whatever he wanted. He lacked the concept that portions were needed for living expenses, utilities, and taxes. It was pure

child's allowance mentality.

“What can you do? Your debt is real.”

"Why not? Think about it. With this salary, we can pay off our debt in just a few years. So we can pay it back whenever we want, right?"

Alan's bad habit began to show. And as usual, the other two started to agree with him.

“Well, yeah…”

“…You might be right.”

“Hmph! We're not kids! How we pay back our debts is our own business! Besides, with the capital, there are ways to multiply it! If things go well, we could be debt-free tomorrow!”

“But it gets automatically deducted, so what can we do?”

“Hey, hey, don't you have a buddy in the General Accounting Department? The one who got promoted to section chief…”

“Oh, Dan!”

“I looked out for that guy back in the day. He won't say no.” Alan sat back, brimming with confidence.

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“No way, no way! Your pay is supposed to go toward debt repayment after leaving the minimum wage, right? That's the contract!”

“Work something out!” Contrary to his earlier words, Alan bowed low, hands pressed together in supplication to Dan.

“You're probably thinking of using it for gambling or investments, right?”

“Gulp! N-no, but if I make a good profit, I can pay back the debt and show you my gratitude too!”

“That self-serving way of thinking hasn't changed since your student days… Seriously, have you forgotten how you always fail with that same pattern?”

“That was Barry's fault!”

“What?! You're the one who screwed up, Alan!”

Alan and the other two began arguing about the reasons for their failure. This was a familiar sight to Dan. He had been watching silently with a dumbfounded look on his face, but he intervened just before the three started fighting.

“Guys… If you get caught this time, you're done for. No, worse—you could end up in

prison.”

“Prison!? We haven't done anything wrong!”

“Are you stupid?! This communication itself is the problem. Listen, you guys are on the blacklist. And since you're in a department handling classified info, if you get tangled up in any weird trouble— you'll be fired on the spot. That's why GP mediated the debt settlement. And now you're demanding your full salary?”

“Getting paid for our work is our basic right, isn't it?”

“That debt is the result of you guys relentlessly asserting your rights. Next comes the obligation to repay. You talk about compensation for work, but even the bonuses and allowances attached to this paycheck weren't supposed to be paid. It's a favor to help you pay off the debt as quickly as possible!”

“Well, we do appreciate that. That's exactly why we're trying to figure out how to pay it back faster…”

Dan had seen countless examples since his student days of friends who trusted Alan getting burned. And this time, it was crystal clear the damage would hit Dan himself.

“This negotiation is at a level where I'm obligated to report it up the chain. If I do this, I'll be fired for sure! But just this once, I'll treat it as a personal consultation and not report it. You can think of your bonus as never having existed!”

“At least this once…”

“Your lack of tact is more impressive than it is infuriating. …Hey, Alan. Managing your entire salary means you'll have to deal with debt collectors yourself. Well, if you get caught by those guys, they'll probably strip you of even your minimum wage.”

“Why the hell do we have to do that!?”

“You really are incapable of understanding a single word I say! Fine, I've lost all desire to cover for you… Listen carefully: either take your full pay for this job and get fired, or give up and settle for minimum wage. It's one or the other! Now decide right this instant!”

“What!? Hey, we're friends, right?”

“This isn't school anymore. We both have responsibilities now! Come on, make up your mind already!”

“…Then what about getting the full paycheck and continuing the job…”

Dan had patiently and earnestly tried his best to shield Alan and the others from their reckless words. But responding to his friend's ultimatum like this? He was beyond stupid.

Click!

Dan abruptly cut the connection.

“Hey, wait a minute!”

Alan frantically tried to reconnect, but there was no response from Dan at all.

“Damn… What's with that attitude? Just because he's a little higher up, he thinks he can act all high and mighty?”

“Hey, that guy seemed pretty pissed. Is he okay?”

“What about our pay, Alan?”

Unaware of why they'd angered their friend or how idiotic they were being, Alan and the others started spouting nonsense. Then NB arrived, looking just as annoyed as Alan and the others.

“Hey, Three Stooges, listen up. My paycheck hasn't been deposited.”

“Who's the Three Stooges?! Anyway, you're the captain's equipment, so there's no way you'd get a salary!”

“What?! That's discrimination! Those GP idiots have no clue how much work I've put in!”

“Take your complaints to the captain. We're busy… Oh! That's it!” Alan stood up, looking pleased.

“Let's get the captain to treat us! If we hold a crew bonding party, it'll kill two birds with one stone!”

“Kill two birds with one stone?”

“As our superior, the captain can't exactly split the bill, right? Plus, if we play our cards right, it's a chance to get closer to Gyokuren-san and the others!”

“Ooh! Keep pouring the drinks until they're dead drunk… Heh heh heh”

“Hey, you guys, the captain's underage. We can't go anywhere that serves high-alcohol drinks. Anyway, Kiriko-san wouldn't allow it.”

“Then how about we say goodbye to the Captain after the first round, and have him cover the second round expenses?”

“Whoa, that's brilliant!”

“Let's go propose it right away!”

Just as Alan and the other two were about to head toward the captain's quarters with their bold proposal,

“This way, everyone.”

Led by Hakuren and Kiriko, ten muscular, athletic-looking military men entered the Kamidake mess hall, stomping loudly.

“There you are, Alan, Barry, Cohen!”

A man who seemed to be the commander stood with his arms crossed, towering over Alan and the others.

“Huh? You… Could you be Ryan? Somehow, you look…”

Alan stared at the man before him, speechless. While his face retained traces of his former self, from the neck down he looked like a completely different person, as if someone had done a collage, so muscular had he become.

“I got assigned to the military and worked out like crazy! Wahahahaha!!”

“Oh, right. So, what's up with showing up out of the blue today?”

“Dan asked me to come. But don't worry, we won't abandon our fellow recruits, no matter how trash they are! Gwahahahahahahahaha~~~!” Ryan laughed heartily and signaled to his subordinates.

“Huh?”

Alan and the others, held by the arms by the burly men, were dumbfounded, unable to grasp the situation. After confirming they had been secured, Ryan immediately rushed over to Kiriko and saluted.

“Then, Masaki-senaei. I'll be borrowing Alan, Barry, and Cohen!”

“Sensei?”

“That's right! This instructor was renowned throughout the military for her exceptional combat skills. She was called 'The Demon'. I don't know how many times she pushed me to the brink of a heart attack…”

“Cut the 'Demon' stuff, Sergeant.”

Kiriko looked around shyly. Her gesture was so delicate it was hard to believe Ryan's words were true.

“Hah! My apologies!” Ryan straightened his back and saluted again.

“Shh, a heart attack!? You've got to be kidding me! Why do we have to suffer this? Kiriko-san, please say something to this muscle-bound idiot!”

“There's an official order, so it can't be helped. You'll just have to tough it out for a little while longer.”

“Noooooo~~~. We're close, aren't we? ♡”

Alan's whiny, cat-like voice and his insensitive expression instantly evaporated any sympathy Kiriko might have felt. It wasn't just Kiriko; his overly familiar attitude towards the other crew members had been a problem before, making it impossible to overlook any longer.

“Sergeant, take him away now! No mercy whatsoever!! Thoroughly crush their spoiled attitudes and retrain them properly!!!”

It was the demonic expression Ryan and the others knew all too well.

Ryan saluted cheerfully, “Fuhahahaha, Roger that! Now, everyone, run!”

At Ryan's command, the men grabbed the screaming Alan and the others under their arms and started running.

“Well then, I'll be off!”

“Thank you for your hard work!”

NB approached Kiriko, who was seeing Ryan and his team off, and stared intently at her profile.

“…Kiriko-san, you were also a combat instructor? You were even called a demon…”

“I know… Don't tell the captain, NB.”

Kiriko's eyes, looking down at NB, were exactly what Ryan had described as those of a “demon.” Kiriko's body possessed the strength to crush NB, and depending on NB's response, she intended to wield that power immediately.

“Hah! O-of course!”

“Yes, thank you.” Kiriko's expression changed completely. With a gentle smile, she ascended to the bridge alongside Hakuren.

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“Hey, Kiriko. What were those guys from earlier here for?” Amane called out to Kiriko as soon as she reached the bridge, as if she'd been waiting for her.

“I don't know the full details… but they came to 're-educate' Alan-kun and his boys. Well, they had proper orders, and Kamidake can't move for a while anyway due to maintenance checks and software rewrites, so it's no problem.”

“In that case, it's their own fault.”

Amane had been monitoring Dan and Alan's earlier communication, so she had a general grasp of the situation. Previously, Alan and his crew had tried to turn Gyokuren and the girls into idols and manage them, only to be firmly rebuffed. They'd stayed quiet for a little while, but soon enough, they'd approached Amane and Kiriko with similar schemes. Their actions

had escalated, and dangerous proposals—like exploiting the girls' weaknesses—had even begun circulating among them.

“But those guys are the same type of idiots as Seiryo, so even if they regret it at the time, I don't know how long they'll keep quiet.”

“If it comes to that, we'll have to ask Ryan-kun and his boys again.”

“How considerate of you… Ah~, by the way…” Amane leaned close to Kiriko and whispered with a sly grin, “I had no idea you was called the Demon Instructor.”

For Amane, this was far more intriguing than Alan and the others' future.

“Y-You were peeking!” Kiriko turned pale and flustered, instinctively looking toward Seina.

“It's fine. The captain didn't see anything, didn't see anything.”

“If you tell the captain about that, I won't forgive you either Amane.” Kiriko glared at Amane with the same eyes she'd used to glare at NB earlier.

Anyone unfamiliar with Kiriko's character would have reacted just like NB did, but Amane, who'd known her for a long time, understood it was just a bluff.

“What's the point of covering it up now? The Captain saw you rampaging through the Linamix, covered in blood.” Amane smiled, striking at Kiriko's weakness.

“Aaaah!” Kiriko's bravado crumbled instantly.

Having Seina witness the part of herself she most wanted to hide should have been a deep trauma for Kiriko. However, because Seina accepted that part of her, the trauma itself wasn't severe. Instead, it became one of Kiriko's endearing weaknesses.

Since that incident, Seina's position in Kiriko's mind had gradually shifted from that of a younger brother needing protection to that of a man. In the process, Kiriko's “fear of being known and feared” transformed into “the embarrassment of being known.” The former was pain, the latter ticklishness… or rather, it had become a good (?) source of teasing.

(So cute) Amane fought the urge to hug her, watching Kiriko's face as she looked like she might cry.

Unaware of the conflict between the two, Seina stared at his pay slip on the captain's chair monitor.

(Wow, my pay really did get deposited…)

The salary deposited into Seina's account was exactly triple what Alan and the others received. As discussed with Kenneth and Rajau recently, this amount didn't include any allowances. Still, Seina was deeply moved by his first paycheck earned through his own work.

“Um, Kiriko-san. I have something I'd like to discuss with you?”

“Huh? Wh-what is it, Captain?” Kiriko quickly wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes and pretended to be calm.

“Well, you know, we got paid today…”

“Oh! What, you wanna go grab a drink or something?”

“Amane! The captain's underage!”

“Then how about a dinner party?”

“Oh, that sounds nice.”

Hakuren and the others, who had been keeping their distance due to the strange atmosphere between Amane and Kiriko, joined the conversation.

“Hey ladies!”

“Well, um… I was actually thinking of sending money back home… and I was wondering if you could tell me roughly what living expenses cost here for a month?” In other words, he intended to send everything else home.

Amane and Hakuren, who had been chatting excitedly, felt ashamed by his earnest words and fell silent.

“…Um, Kiriko, is Seina's family really that poor?”

“Considering Seina-sama's particular circumstances, it's certainly plausible.”

Gyokuren, who was always dead serious about Seina, was the first to approach Kiriko with her concerns, followed by Karen and Suiren. Hakuren, meanwhile, had already flipped the switch and entered a thought loop.

“If he lived communally like at Amane-sama's house, living expenses wouldn't be an issue…”

“I don't think Seina-sama would be satisfied with that. Why not just have him contribute a reasonable fixed amount as living expenses for now, and set it aside as savings just in case?”

“Whoa, that's so Gyokuren!”

“Ah, um, everyone—”

Ignoring Kiriko's attempts to stop them, Amane and the others huddled in a circle to discuss it.

“The problem is entertainment and social expenses, right?”

“Well, Seina doesn't really have any expensive hobbies…”

“Heh. As for women, I can handle that part.”

“Kiriko'll kill us. The real problem is the entertainment expenses.”

“Being a captain comes with its share of troubles, after all.”

“Seina-sama is still a student and falls under the jurisdiction of Airi-sama, Mikami-sama, and Mitoto-sama, so any work-related social engagements would likely take the form of accompanying those individuals “

“Then it would be treated as an expense… If I were to use it, it would be for personal friendships.”

“Food and lodging aren't a problem, but what about clothing? There's always Kitakiri Suzume…”

“Kitakiri Suzume” **(TN: Perpetual Sparrow)** referred to clothing that changed shape and color via software. Basic designs came with the purchase, and free software was available online. Two sets—top and bottom—would suffice, eliminating laundry hassles.

“It would be shameful to make him wear such things while he's here.”

“Then I'll bring some used samples from my family home. There are plenty of samples from other manufacturers too, so that should cover it.”

“Wow, Kaunaq samples?”

“I'll bring the everyday basics. As for the rest…”

“Medical expenses, right?” Finally giving up, Kiriko joined in.

“Oh, I'd forgotten about that. You're sharp, Kiriko.”

“I appreciate everyone's concern, and of course, I'll carry out the plan we've had so far. But…”

Saying that, Kiriko turned to Seina and spoke.

“Captain… no, Seina-chan. You really don't need to worry too much about sending an allowance. Your family's business is doing well, after all.”

“I've heard that a few times… but it just didn't feel real. Sure, when I was back home, customers came by when I wasn't there…” Seina hadn't contacted home in a while.

When his mother had reached out once, —Everyone here is doing fine. And since luck might run away, you don't need to contact us. Well, Kiriko-chan is there, so you should be okay, right? Bye— and hung up without waiting for a response. Since then, there had been no contact from her side, nor had he reached out.

“Besides, we've arranged to send money home from the bonuses and allowances that

should be included in your salary. It's better for you to use your salary as you see fit. After all, everyone needs a different minimum amount each month anyway.”

“I see. Understood. Then I'll leave their allowance to you.”

At that moment, Seina remembered that his salary was three times that of Kenneth and Rajau. (So I guess the minimum salary is meant to be enough to live on normally…)

“Oh dear, it seems we've interrupted something.”

As if to quell Gyokuren and the others' discontent, “I'll explain the details properly later. Besides, I did say we'd implement the plan you came up with, didn't I?” Kiriko whispered so Seina couldn't hear, then turned back to Seina.

“As always, Tennyo-sama is waiting. Please hurry, Captain.”

“Ah, yes.” Deep in thought, Seina quickly moved the captain's chair and disappeared downstairs.

“It's like he's being chased out. Is there something you don't want him to hear?”

“Captain… no, I just don't want Seina-chan to know his actual salary.”

“Don't want him to know? Seina isn't exactly the type to waste money, is he?”

“Ever since he was a child… when he had money he wasn’t used to handling it, in the end he would up lose it or get scammed. You know how much Seina-chan's bonuses and allowances are, right?”

“…Well, I don't think it's anything special, or that it really matches the job, you know?”

“Listen, if you think about how the minimum wage for regular members is a third of what Seina-chan makes, you'll understand how much it really is! You bourgeois woman!”

“Oh! I see. That makes it sound pretty rough, hahahaha.”

Amane and the others quickly calculated the situation in their heads and nodded in agreement. Incidentally, Hakuren's though loop had been stopped by Karen, just like always.

After returning to the research base and undergoing the usual physical examination, Seina was informed by Tennyo about the Kamidake's renovation.

“Kamidake’s renovation?”

“Yes. We've accumulated quite a bit of test data, found various issues, and want to test different equipment too.”

“Different equipment?”

“Kamidake is designed to be customized based on usage conditions. The current hull is the basic type with no additional equipment. Well, even when we say 'customization,' the appearance hardly changes at all.” Tennyo glanced briefly at Elma as she spoke.

But Elma didn't stop her work, remaining silent.

“Hey, Elma.”

“……”

“Elma! Are you listening?”

Not sure if she was engrossed in her work or just spacing out, Tennyo raised her voice slightly at Elma, who seemed a bit off from her usual self.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. What is it?”

“So, there's this major renovation coming up for Kamidake, right? And since it'll be out of commission for about a week, I was wondering if Seina-chan and Elma should take their vacation time now?”

“If it's for Kamidake’s renovation, I'd like to help too…”

“But I'd hate for you to mess up because you're spacing out.”

“S-sorry. I'll be careful.”

“It's fine. I'm the one who's sorry for making you deal with all this. But you’ve seemed a bit tired these past few days… you know?” Tennyo gently placed her hand on Elma's shoulder, as if to reassure her.

“No, I'm really fine.”

“No, no! Besides, Airi-sama told me to make sure you get some rest.”

“Airi-sama?”

“Well, to be precise, there were complaints from the Secretary General, the Accounting Department, and the Labor Standards Inspection Division. You've been paid a generous salary with allowances, so you can relax a bit.”

“…Understood.” Elma reluctantly nodded. It was as if she didn't want to take the break at all.

(This is tough… All of this is for my sake… That's right!)

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Upon returning to the dorm, Seina immediately booted up the monitor and connected to the net. Accessing a website introducing gifts for women, Seina opened the accessories page for now.

“I finally got my first paycheck. I should get something for the people who've helped me so far. My budget is…”

"What are you doing, Master? Oh, are you interested in jewelry?" NB, who had appeared behind him unnoticed, peered over his shoulder.

“D-don't look, NB!”

“…It's a woman.”

“Ugh!”

“A man picking out accessories? That can only mean one thing—a gift for a woman! Besides, accessories aren't really your style, are they?” NB perched proudly on Seina's shoulder.

Seina began speaking, sounding resigned. “…I just got my first paycheck, so I was thinking about giving something to the people who've helped me out so far…”

“So, have you decided who to give them to?”

“My family would probably say they'd rather have cash than stuff. And even before that, what would happen if I carelessly gave them something from here…”

“There's the possibility of overtechnology in the processing techniques or materials, you see.”

“For now, Kiriko-san is sending them money, so I guess that'll do. Next is Tenchi-senpai's place, but…”

“That one's kinda tricky, isn't it? If it's just for Tenchi-san, fine, but…”

“Sasami-chan and Aeka-san… Hmm… Yeah, you're right. The level of our relationships is totally different, so it can't be the same for everyone… It really is tricky.” The people at Tenchi's house ranged from those he'd known since childhood to people he'd never even met.

“Tenchi-san is your childhood friend, right? If you give him a gift with your first paycheck, wouldn't that just make him feel awkward? Honestly, wouldn't it be better to give something everyone can use, like a year-end gift?”

“I see… You're right, that might be better. In that case, I should do the same for Kai… Ah, but I really want to do something special for Aunt Tsukiko.”

“That's fine for her, right? Then of course, there's Kiriko-san.”

“Yeah. And… Uncle Dai?”

“That scatterbrained old man can be lumped together with Kai, right? Like Tenchi’s family, you can send a year-end gift to Tsukiko’s family, and just give Tsukiko-san something separate.”

“Yeah, that's right.”

Even though he was Kai's father, Dai wasn't married to Tsukiko, let alone living with her. He just came to see Kai occasionally. Even when he went to Tsukiko's house, he mostly just lazed around. There were hardly any memories of him playing with them or doing anything together. He was attentive to his son Kai and girls, but he showed almost no interest in anyone else.

“And for the people from Masaki's village…”

“Tsukiko-san can report on that, right? If you include them, you won't be able to cut it down.”

“Well, I suppose so… Um, next is Amane-san, Elma-san, Hakuren-san, and her team too.” Seina recited it as if memorizing it in his head.

“If it's just Kiriko-san handling that part, it might cause friction… And?”

“Seto-sama and Minaho-san too…”

“Whoa, a first-month-salary gift for Jurai's Demon Princess…? Master, are you planning something crazy or something?”

“But she's the one who made it possible for me to be in space. I can't just skip her.”

“Hmm… So, who’s next?”

“Well now…”

“You know who! Your greatest benefactor!”

Seina's head, deep in thought, was tapped lightly by a slim manipulator.

“My greatest benefactor?… Oh no, I forgot about Tennyo-san!”

“What!”

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“What?! Why is that little brat the most important one?!” Airi, who had been connected to the NB network in the chairman's office, shouted loudly.

Mikami, who had been watching her curiously, quietly approached behind Airi.

“There must be more! Beautiful women with mature charm?”

“Beautiful and maturely alluring?”

“Exactly!” Airi, looking irritated, leaned closer to the monitor showing Seina deep in thought.

“Oh, right! I have to give one to Principal Mikami too!”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

“What am I?” Mikami asked Airi, who was slumped face down on the desk, in a puzzled tone.

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“What's this about…? I told you I'd send you a thank-you gift since I got my first paycheck, right?”

“A thank-you gift? Oh, I see… So that's what this is about.” NB nodded in understanding.

“You're weird. Are you broken or something?”

“I was just thinking about something else. Anyway, Mikami-san, given her position, shouldn't be able to accept gifts from a student.”

“Oh… Hmm…”

It would be somewhat problematic for the principal, in her official capacity, to accept a gift from a student. Even though he had a private relationship with Mikami, it was through Airi and Mitoto, and by the standards of this occasion, including her as a candidate was a bit iffy.

"What's this? Or is it a present for that younger Mikami-san I met the other day?"

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“…You pervert!” Airi regained control of her NB and yelled, shooing Mikami away with her hand.

“No!”

“Oh my, you're blushing. Hmph! Anyway, let's continue from before! There are other people who need to receive presents, right?”

“Umm… because you kept interrupting me, I forgot where we left off!” With that, Seina opened a small note-taking monitor and began making a list.

“My family gets allowance money, Tenchi-senpai gets something like a year-end gift everyone can use, Kai and Uncle Dai are the same… then Tsukiko-san, Kiriko-san, Amane-san, Elma-san, Hakuren-san, Gyokuren-san, Karen-san, Suiren-san…”

“Tch! You remember the forgettable girls, so why me…”

“Huh? Do you want some accessories too, NB?”

“No! Just continue the list!”

“What are you angry about? …Um, Seto-sama, Minaho-san, Tennyo-san. But I really want

Principal Mikami to get one too.”

“Hehe… Maybe Mikami over there wouldn't mind.”

Mikami smiled slightly, looking a bit embarrassed, and shot a triumphant glance at Airi.

“Damn it! You!”

Airi glared at Mikami out of the corner of her eye, clenching her fist in frustration.

“Come on, come on, come on, come on, come on, come on, next! Next!”

Don't rush me… Oh! I forgot about Mitoto-san! No, no!

“Dammit! Next!”

“Onnainin-san and Minami-sama too. I wrecked the GP ship, after all.”

“What the hell do old men and geezers want with accessories?!”

“It's not just limited to accessories!”

“Ugh! Just move on!”

“You've been acting really weird today. Should I get you checked out?”

“Forget that, next one… Huh?” At that moment, Airi found a clever excuse to remind herself.

“Oh yeah, the check! The check! That's it, that's it! Who's checking the NB!?”

“Well, of course… Ah! That's it. Oh, I forgot. It's Airi-san!”

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“Yes, that's it! You're forgetting the beautiful, gorgeous Airi-san, Master!” NB said with a little skip as he patted Seina's shoulder.

Seina looked at NB suspiciously, taken aback by his excessive excitement.

“You were like this when we met Kenneth and Rajau, too. Don't you have some weird program installed?”

“I'm just stating the facts objectively.”

“I'll admit she's beautiful, but that personality… I just can't see her as Minaho-san's mom. Minaho-san definitely takes after her father.”

“What!? What do you mean!?”

“Tenchi-senpai's grandfather might be a bit playful, but he's perfectly normal. Aunt Kiyone and Tennyo-san are both gentle and kind people too…”

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“That's just an excuse! Kiyone and Tennyo are way, way, way worse than me!” Airi practically clung to the monitor, her face close to it, and excitedly and desperately tried to defend herself.

“You know, it's not good to say bad things about people. You've never met Auntie Kiyone, let alone Tennyo-san, right? …I mean, Airi-san…”

Oh no! Airi became nervous, thinking that NB's trick had been discovered.

“She's sending you some questionable information. What a troublesome person. I'll ask Elma-san to delete it next time.”

——Giggle.

Seina remained calm, while Airi acted childish. Airi's secretary squad and Mikami, who had gathered behind her unnoticed, covered their mouths and giggled.

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“Well, she has certainly been helpful in many ways, so naturally, I should give her a present.”

“R-really?” NB happily rubbed up against Seina.

“Besides, if I leave her out, who knows what she might do to me.” Seina said jokingly with a laugh.

“Come to think of it, there's this story in an Earth fairy tale… about a witch who cursed a princess just because she wasn't invited to the princess's birthday party…”

“Ah, Airi-san wouldn't do something that awful.”

“Hmm… I guess so…”

Seina thought about how Airi would react.

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“…If it were Airi-san, she'd barge into the princess's birthday party, eat up all the food and drink all the alcohol, get into a fight with anyone and everyone, wreak havoc, and then get drunk and fall asleep right there, hahaha.”

Seina's spot-on analogy had the onlookers behind Airi doubled over on the floor, trying to stifle their laughter.

“Wh-what?! I wouldn't do something like that…” Unfortunately, Airi didn't have the confidence to deny it. Somehow, she thought… she might just do that.

“…Well, if you're going to give me something too, then fine.” Airi murmured, pulled a chair closer, and sat down gracefully.

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“But you should give the best one to Airi-san, you know.”

“The best one?”

“How about this one!”

An image of a ring appeared, its delicate craftsmanship adorned with dazzling jewels. The price displayed was enough to build a house.

“How many decades would it take to pay this off?! I'll find something myself!” Seina turned his back on NB and started searching.

NB suddenly fell silent, staring intently at Seina's back for a while.

“Oh yeah! I forgot something important. Hey, Master, I'm actually busy tomorrow.”

“Huh? What are you suddenly talking about?”

“So, while you're out shopping, pick this up for me too.”

“…Huh? What?!” Looking at the list displayed by NB, Seina turned pale.

The items listed were few in number, but the total cost easily exceeded Seina's salary. Of course, the savings from selling meat earlier were more than enough to cover the cost…

“Why the hell do I have to buy this stuff?!”

“If you don't want Kiriko and the others to find out about their presents, then go buy it.”

“You!?… Is it okay to have equipment that threatens its owner? Typical cosmic science…”

“What a strange way to show admiration. Hmph… Relax, the payment's already been transferred. All you need to do is pick up the item.”

“Already transferred? Where did you get that money? You didn't do anything shady, did you?”

“Nothing shady's going on behind the scenes, so relax. So, what are you gonna do?”

As NB slowly leaned closer, Seina finally resigned himself.

“…Alright.”

“Good answer. After all, with presents, the joy of receiving one is all the greater when you don't know about it beforehand.”

“Don't get your hopes up too high, though. My budget's pretty tight…”

“Well, it's fun to agonize over it. That's part of the fun, heh heh heh heh…” Suddenly, NB's laughter stopped, and he fell silent.

“Huh? What's wrong?”

“…Listen, Master… I need something too…” NB's demeanor changed abruptly, his tone becoming solemn.

“Something for you too…? Is there still something you need to buy?”

“…Oh, never mind. Forget it.”

“You're acting even weirder than usual today, aren't you? Maybe I should get you properly serviced next time,” Seina tilted his head in puzzlement.

“Seina-chan, dinner's ready. Come on down.” Kiriko's voice came from the monitor.

“Ah, yes. I'll be right there.” Seina said to the monitor, saved his list, and stood up.

“NB, keep your promise.”

“I know that.”

Seina took the elevator down to the first floor of the dormitory and met up with Kiriko and the others waiting at the entrance.

The first floor housed the cafeteria, a large bathhouse, the fitness center, and entertainment facilities, functioning as a small leisure complex. It was open not only to GP team members staying in the dormitory but also to the general public. Because of this, the conspicuous Kiriko and her group always drew attention. Today, however, despite the large crowd present, everyone turned a blind eye, and the area was eerily quiet.

“Ah, here they come! Over here, Seina-kun!” There, the very person responsible for silencing the place, Masaki Airi, was waving happily.

“S-sorry to keep you waiting…”

“Let's go then.”

Airi took Seina and Elma—whose expression had clouded slightly—by the hand and started running toward the cafeteria.

“A-Airi-sama!?”

“Airi-san, there's no need to rush like that.”

“I'm starving!”

Airi dashed into the cafeteria and charged toward the food with a momentum that perfectly fit the word “charge.” There were several cafeterias, but this one was buffet-style. Airi grabbed several extra-large plates and began piling enormous amounts of food onto them with incredible speed.

“Whoa…” Seina and the others stared at her speechless.

Though it looked chaotic at first glance, the food on her plates was arranged neatly and beautifully, each dish placed so the flavors wouldn't mix.

“As expected from the owner of Nashisu.”

Before the impressed eyes of Kiriko and the others, Airi finished preparing her food and drinks in no time and started walking toward the terrace.

“Come on, hurry up!”

Urged by Airi, Seina and the others began loading food onto their plates.

The terrace was still sparsely populated. It wouldn't get crowded until later at night, when the starry sky and city lights became truly beautiful. But Seina loved this time of day, when he could see the overwhelmingly beautiful formations impossible to see on Earth. Beside him, Airi had barely sat down before starting to eat.

“Hmm… That guy's really developed a knack for bringing out good flavors, hasn't he?”

“Airi-san, do you know the person who cooked this?”

“He used to cook for Nashisu’s catering department.”

“Ah, no wonder. I thought the flavor was surprisingly good for a large cafeteria like this.”

“Oh, I see.”

Seina liked the food here. Since starting his stay, he'd eaten at several cafeterias, but this one suited his palate best. He hadn't immediately recognized the similarity to Nashisu's flavor—likely due to different ingredients and the chef's personal touches.

“Speaking of which, Seina-kun, what are you planning to spend your first paycheck on?” Airi asked while eating a mountain of dessert after polishing off the huge amount of food she'd brought to the table.

“!!”

Those who knew through NB that Seina was planning to buy gifts reacted to Airi's words and

glanced at Seina. From their expressions, it seemed only Kiriko and Amane were unaware.

“Huh, that… I'll use it for living expenses and savings or something.”

“Whaaaaaat? Seriously? It’s Payday yo, payday! Shouldn’t you be treating yourself, indulging in luxuries you can't normally afford?”

“The best way to reward myself is to get a salary, and since coming to the Academy I've been able to enjoy luxuries that I normally wouldn't be able to have…”

“That's great, Seina-chan. If you think about the future, you shouldn't waste money.”

“Hmph! You know what's good? Men need to splurge sometimes. The more money you spend, the more it comes back to you!”

“Seina-chan, don't fall for that devil's words.”

“Who's the devil? You little brat!”

“Taking one in a million success stories and presenting it like it's common knowledge to ruin people—that's nothing but the work of a devil!”

Most of the people there nodded in agreement at Kiriko's words. However, one person, Gyokuren, had her eyes closed while drinking tea.

Airi noticed this, “Gyokuren-chan. A grown woman like you would understand, right?” She said in a soothing voice.

“I don't know if what Airi-sama said is correct, but…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“If Seina-sama were to fall into ruin, I would take care of him.”

“Huh?”

Stared at with sincere eyes, Seina flushed bright red and looked at Gyokuren.

Gyokuren's extraordinary beauty, and the breathtaking view—if the other person were a handsome actress, it might have been a scene from a drama or movie. But paired with Seina, an ordinary-looking boy, it created an intense sense of incongruity that instead delivered a powerful impact. And there, formed in that natural everyday moment—something no acting skill could ever express—was a space where time seemed to stand still. The other women, even Kiriko, seemed captivated by the scene, staring intently.

“Heh.” Gyokuren looked at Airi triumphantly.

In that instant, time in the room started moving again, and Kiriko and the girls exhaled sharply.

“You… you used me! Seina-kun, be careful! Ah, that's what they mean by a devil—a girl like

her!” Airi shouted, forcing down the dessert stuffed in her mouth with tea.

She must have been deeply frustrated by how captivated she'd been by the earlier scene, for tears welled up in her eyes.

“Yes, yes, Airi-sama lost.”

“Damn it!”

Airi gobbled down the rest of the dessert, grabbed her plate and ran off, then returned with another pile of food and began eating it with gusto.

“Well, well… Speaking of which, did you hear about Seiryo, Seina?” Amane said a little louder, refusing to let the scene from earlier linger in her mind and fall silent.

“Ah, no.”

“Come to think of it, I completely forgot about that.”

If they fell silent, it would feel like losing to Gyokuren. Kiriko and the others, as if shaking off sleepiness, swayed their bodies and looked toward Amane.

“Apparently, his family is haggling over the ransom, so he's not getting released anytime soon.”

“Huh? But Tennan-sensei's family… they're rich, right?”

“His dad's famous for being a tightwad.”

“But does that mean he'd haggle over the ransom?”

“Seina-sama. According to our intel, the pirates seem to be getting fed up too. They're lowering the price as the Tennan family demanded and trying to cut off negotiations…”

“You're trying to stop that, aren't you, Hakuren?”

“Yes.” Hakuren nodded with a wry smile.

“I figured. That old man over there loves negotiating—it's practically his hobby… He probably figured he'd found someone he could play with, heh heh heh.”

“I hope he returns soon.”

“Hey, hey, Kiriko, worrying is just a waste of time! He might become a proper pirate someday and show up before Kamidake.”

“No way.”

While Kiriko and the girls laughed, Elma's gaze turned to Seina, and her smile held a hint of sadness.

Seiryo, the subject of that conversation, was being held captive at the headquarters of the Da Ruma Guild, The Big Da Ruma. He was in a block under Tarrant Shank's jurisdiction, primarily used to hold hostages who had been kidnapped.

Each pirate had their own specialty in the black market, buying and selling stolen goods at The Big Da Ruma before shipping them out.

“Hmm… I see. So this is how things work here.”

Seiryo, brought here with all contact to the outside world cut off, had no way of knowing where he was. But Seiryo utilized the capabilities of his nanomachine-based cyborg body to investigate the Big Da Ruma's interior. The nanomachines composing Seiryo were constantly upgraded with the latest technology, so the Da Ruma Guild's scientific capabilities were unable to detect that he was a cyborg.

This ability was why he could survive repeated merciless attacks, being dumped on uncharted planets, into the deep sea, or any other hellish location. As long as this ability remained undiscovered, escaping the Big Da Ruma wouldn't be particularly difficult for him.

But Seiryo was an idiot.

“Still… when will I be released?”

His exploration of the Big Da Ruma's interior wasn't for escape, nor out of any sense of duty as a GP. It was simply because he was bored.

“Well, someone of my caliber would command an enormous ransom, hahahaha… First, I suppose I should greet my fellow captives.” Seiryo directed his consciousness toward the nano-probe conducting reconnaissance.

“……Huh!?” Seiryo noticed that a female GP who had been confined to a certain cell was gone.

“What?! Has she been safely released?”

The cell block where Seiryo was held mostly contained hostages held for ransom. They would be released once negotiations concluded. A dozen or so other men and women were also missing.

“Huh? …What!?”

Just then, one of Seiryo's thousands of nanoprobes detected a cleverly concealed block. Inside one room of that block, the missing men and women were discovered scattered about in a pitiful state.

“What the hell!? What the hell is this!?”

Seiryo grimaced at the gruesome sight. He struggled desperately to keep down the

breakfast he'd just stuffed himself with.

“What the hell is this place!?”

Fleeing that room, he moved through the block and found Tarrant and a young man who appeared to be his second-in-command in a room with luxurious interior decoration, clearly different from the others.

“That's Tarrant Shank!”

Tarrant, apparently fresh from a shower, lay sprawled on the sofa with only a bath towel wrapped around his waist. His body was covered in regenerative casts and patches.

“Tarrant-sama, the conversion adjustments for the Daidoros Core's new hull are complete. It's heading this way now.”

“Have it dock at the central port in the Big Da Ruma. Show it off to as many of them as possible. Some bastards have started to underestimate the name Tarrant. So, what's the status on the phantom extermination?”

“Thanks to deploying Huo’s team, we've exceeded sixty percent coverage.”

“Heh heh heh, well done. Once the phantom extermination is complete, have them start on that research project.”

“Yes, sir!”

“What about Elma?”

“No movement yet. However, Kamidake has returned to the Academy, so within a day or two, probably…”

“What about Elma's escape arrangements?”

“Arrangements have been made to bring her to the usual spot. But can Elma handle it?”

“Hmph, our objective is Huo. Failure isn't a problem… Though it would be a pity to lose the party's guest of honor, ahahahaha!”

“Hmph… So that's Tarrant… He looks like nothing but a brat.” Seiryo spat out, his gaze fixed on the figure that looked like a middle schooler slumped lazily in front of a convenience store, chatting while leaving scattered trash behind.

Just then, “You look lively.”

“Hm?”

Komachi's voice snapped Seiryo back to attention. Seiryo crossed his arms and turned away, looking displeased.

“What? It's you. I'm in a bad mood. Don't talk to me.”

“Then tell that to your father.”

“I don’t want to hear that from the ones who put us in here, the ones who toyed with us so cruelly.”

“What… What do you mean?”

Komachi reflexively activated the secret wall. While this block fell under Tarrant's jurisdiction, Seiryo was merely being held here temporarily. The wall was installed in case she didn't want others to overhear her conversation with the hostage.

“Tarrant. He took the people here and brought them to a disguised room… It's a sight I'd rather forget.”

“A disguised room? …Wait a minute! What do you mean? It sounds like you saw it with your own eyes?”

“Hmph! Don't underestimate me. There's nothing I don't know!”

“Tarrant's harming the hostages here? But where the hell…”

“Nowhere else. He's in this block. Well, he's hiding cleverly, so I only noticed just now… But what? If I put just a little effort into it, I could see through that level of disguise in an instant, ha ha ha!”

(Nanomachines? But I should have thoroughly investigated this guy… No, more importantly, even if what he says is true, why would he boastfully reveal information that puts himself at a disadvantage?) Komachi stared at the idiot grinning like an idiot, looking thoroughly confused.

“Seiryo, you said… Do you even know where this place is?”

“I couldn't care less about your filthy little hideout.”

“What?”

“I'd like to get the hell out of here already… but I'd get scolded for interrupting Father's negotiations. “

“More like a troublesome customer who keeps haggling over the price, rather than a negotiation…”

“Ha ha ha! Getting good stuff cheap. That's the golden rule of business!”

(Seems he hasn't realized this is The Big Da Ruma… If so, that earlier story loses credibility. But to deny it…) Komachi skillfully coaxed the location of Tarrant's disguised room out of Seiryo with flattery, then hurried back to her own ship.

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“What did you find?” Komachi practically shouted as she burst onto her ship's bridge.

“There is definitely a disguised space. Without knowing the exact location, we probably wouldn't have found it.”

“…I see. So what he said was true.” Komachi's feelings were incredibly complex.

(What he said was true… Then there's no doubting his ability. But he said he didn't know this place was The Big Da Ruma? No, that he wasn't interested? If he has the ability to find that hidden place, knowing this should be a piece of cake… He is definitely a GP member, right?)

Suddenly, Komachi recalled Seiryo's previous words and actions, and the father happily haggling over his son's ransom.

“……Could it be… that guy… is an idiot?”

As Komachi wrestled with this thought, the operator spoke up, gauging the distance between them.

“Komachi-sama, just… the hostage who was missing earlier has returned.”

“What?!” Komachi snapped her head up and moved closer to the surveillance monitor.

All the hostages on the list Seiryo had presented were back in their cells, as if nothing had happened.

“What's going on? Is there anything unusual?”

“From here, I can't tell. If I could investigate directly, perhaps…”

“Like Seiryo, are there any other hostages being held? If it's someone who might cooperate…”

“No good. All of them were purchased outright by Tarrant, and since the ransom has already been transferred, they'll be returned to their families within the next few days.”

“I see… Wait! Do you know where the hostages' families are?”

“…All of them are at the Academy.”

“All of them? Coincidence…? No, that can't be!”

“Maybe that guy knows something?”

Komachi didn't respond to the operator's question and went into deep thought.

(If the bizarre things Seiryo saw were merely a hobby, and he's even reviving and restoring them, that's a weak reason for us to intervene. Even if he was tampering with something, if the target is the Academy, he could make any excuse… Though building an unauthorized facility within the Big Da Ruma would be somewhat problematic…)

Neither the abduction of Ryoko's family nor this incident alone provided sufficient grounds to strip Tarrant of his power and investigate his background.

(If they claim the Ryoko incident was to ensure Yamada Seina was eliminated, and that we're doing something against the hostile Academy, there's nothing we can do about it.)

Tarrant's overreach wasn't something new. While there had been some issues, as long as his actions didn't turn against the Guild, they'd been tolerated.

“Let's observe for a while. Continue the investigation.”

“Understood.”

Chapter Five: A Mix of Joy and Sorrow

After dinner, Seina tried to quickly return to his room, using tiredness as an excuse, to do some preliminary research for the next day's shopping. Sure enough, Airi had been scheming to hold an all-night party in Seina's room. Fortunately, since this was a GP dormitory, drinking alcohol in rooms with minors present was prohibited. Moreover, even Airi couldn't enter Seina's room without permission, as Seina was a qualified captain.

Airi's frustration ultimately turned toward the others, forcing everyone except Seina to join her party. The party apparently took place in Kiriko's room; even when Seina got up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, Kiriko's room light was still on.

“That was a close call… Well, it all worked out in the end…”

The next morning, Seina woke up a little early to avoid running into Kiriko and the others. After picking up the boxed lunch he'd reserved at the usual cafeteria, he was about to hurry past the entrance. But…

“Where are you off to?”

“!?”

Suddenly, a voice called out from beside him, causing Seina to freeze in place. Sitting on the sofa next to him were not only Amane and Kiriko, but also Airi and Hakuren’s girls.

“Huh, you're up early? Last night you were

definitely…”

“We didn't sleep, after all♡” Amane's voice was unnecessarily cheerful.

She seemed to be in a natural high from the all-nighter and party. And it wasn't just Amane.

“Seina-chan, where are you going with that lunch box?”

“Well… Kenneth and Rajau suddenly contacted me yesterday…”

“Maybe they're trying to hit up Seina now that he got paid?” Kiriko's mood was also a bit off.

“Well, yeah, that's about it.”

“Forget about that! Hey, wanna go somewhere fun with me?”

“That's not fair, Amane! I could have…”

“We made a promise… Well then, excuse me!”

While Amane and Kiriko were wrestling, Seina dashed toward the exit. But the others neither tried to stop him nor chase after him; they simply watched his retreating figure.

“Hehe, looks like you've both been dumped.” Gyokuren's slightly drowsy smile after the all-night party doubled its sensuality, becoming the source of a minor discord between the two at the entrance.

“Damn you! To leave such a beauty behind… I'll make sure to find out where you're going, even if you're lying through your teeth!

“Since NB's with him, let's keep an eye on him from here.”

“Kiriko! This is where being on-site matters. What can you possibly see through a monitor?!”

“Well, maybe you're right. But won't he catch us? Seina-chan usually has a pretty good instinct for these situations.”

“Would a first-class detective really screw up like that?”

“You’re a second-class detective. And demoted, at that.”

“Shut up! …I am worried about it… Come on, hurry up or we'll lose sight of them!”

Amane bolted away from Kiriko as if escaping, and Kiriko followed, stifling her laughter. Watching them go, Hakuren looked at Airi with a surprised expression.

“Oh? Airi-sama isn't going? You seem to enjoy this sort of thing.”

“Heh heh, I trust Seina-kun. After all, composure is essential for a mature woman.”

“But then why are you connected to NB’s camera?” Karen peered over Airi's shoulder at the monitor showing Seina.

“I thought I'd watch Amane-chan and Kiriko-chan work. Now, after breakfast, I'll go out to buy supplies too.” With that, she turned off the monitor and stood up. But then she glanced around suddenly.

“…Oh? Where's Elma?”

“She's still in her room, I believe. She seemed quite tired last night.”

“Right. Then let's leave her be.”

With that, she promptly headed toward the dining hall. Despite having stayed up all night eating and drinking, she began piling food onto her plate with the vigor of someone about to clear the breakfast buffet.

Just as Airi and Hakuren headed for the dining hall, Elma stepped out of the elevator. After confirming Airi and Hakuren’s retreating figures, she bowed deeply without a word and walked briskly toward the exit.

Just a ten-minute train ride from the lodgings where Seina and his team were staying was the largest commercial entertainment district within a thousand kilometers. The sheer scale of this world was extraordinary—it was so vast that the size of Earth's suburban mega-shopping malls would need to be multiplied by a factor of three.

A place the size of a city wasn't somewhere you could casually stroll around and find what you wanted. Seina had downloaded a dedicated guide catalog last night and checked the places he wanted to go beforehand. However, upon actually arriving, the layout proved far more complex than he had imagined.

Typically, buildings in any major city were constructed with ground level as the reference point. Shops concentrated on the ground level, the standard for foot traffic. Here, however, there were multiple reference points. Compared to this place, even Earth's major cities with their forests of skyscrapers were essentially flat. This commercial district, spanning hundreds of kilometers in three dimensions, was organized into distinct zones, but even with a map, its sheer vastness was overwhelming.

As the crowds of people walked along the sidewalk, Seina checked his current location on his GPS and frequently checked the map as he moved.

“It's like we're exploring a dungeon. NB is usually the one to call in at times like this, but he just goes off somewhere… What on earth does he want?”

After confirming his first destination, Seina ran in that direction. Once he had gone around a large hedge, he stopped dead in his tracks.

“…Seriously?”

Before Seina stood a high-end lingerie shop. The name alone didn't reveal what kind of merchandise it sold.

“What the hell is he buying in a place like this?”

Seina hesitated in front of the store, but then spotted two pairs of figures inside that looked like couples. Some men seemed uncomfortable, while others chatted cheerfully with their female companions.

Taking courage from those two men, Seina stepped through the store's door.

“Welcome.” A young female clerk greeted Seina warmly as he hurried to the counter.

“Um… I was told to pick up an item here…”

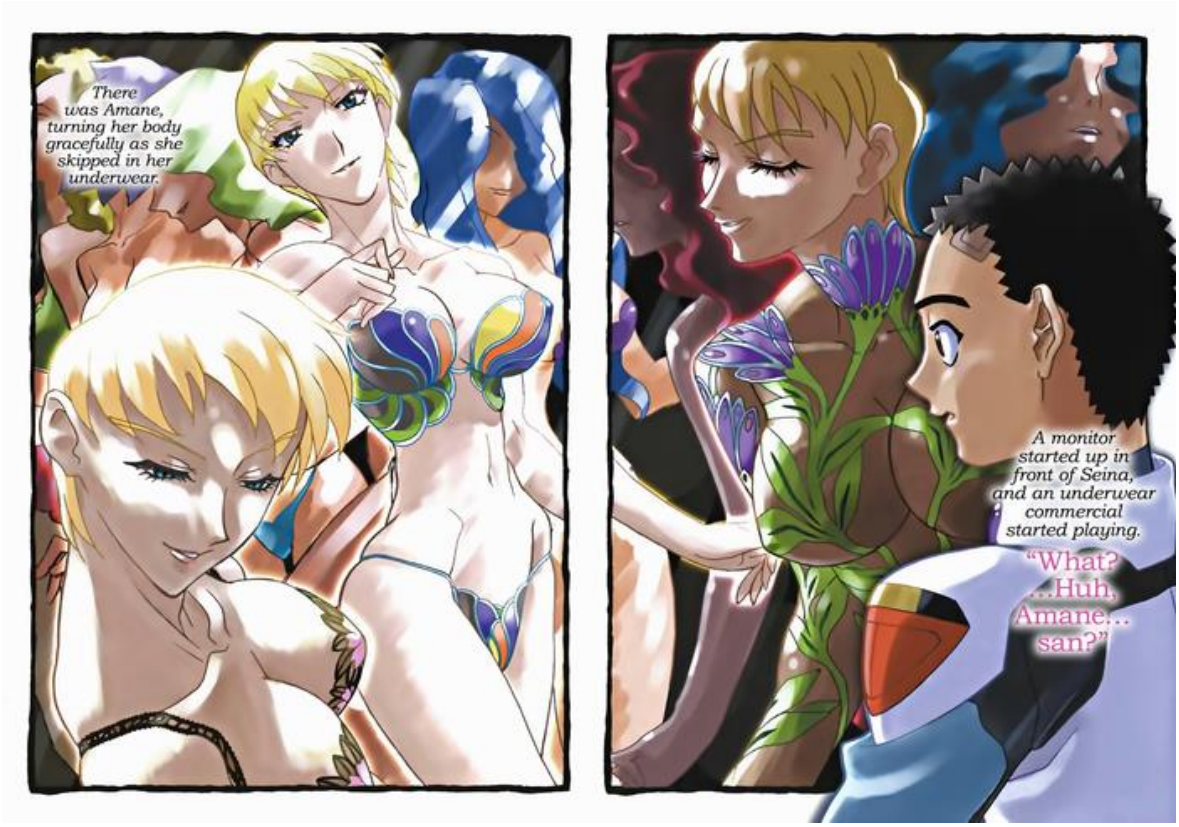
“Yes, please show me your ID so I can verify.”

Following the clerk's instructions, Seina activated his ID on the counter plate. The pickup data instantly appeared and turned blue.

“Yes, this is for NB-sama. Please wait here a moment.”

A circular plate bearing the store's name, which had been in front of the counter, flipped over, seat side up, and floated in front of Seina. He sat at an angle where his face wouldn't be seen by the customers selecting items.

Then, a monitor activated directly in front of Seina, and an advertisement for an underwear manufacturer began playing.


There was Amane, turning her body gracefully as she skipped in her underwear.
A monitor started up in front of Seina, and an underwear commercial started playing.
“What? ...Huh, Amane... san?”

“What? …Huh? Amane…san?”

There, dancing lightly and swaying her body in her underwear, was Amane. Though her face still held a hint of innocence, her beauty remained as sharp and refined as ever. Her figure was slimmer than it was now, a model's physique. The models who appeared one after another were also beautiful women, but Amane truly stood out.

“Wow…” Forgetting the embarrassment of being in a lingerie shop, Seina stared at the screen.

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Kiriko watched Seina sitting at the counter from inside a fitting room at the back of the store. Wearing special optical disguise sunglasses, Kiriko's face was disguised as that of a completely different person.

“Hey, what do you think?” Kiriko whispered to Amane beside her, her gaze fixed on Seina.

“It looks pretty good.” Amane nodded vigorously while watching a video of her personal data wearing the underwear product data.

“I'm not talking about underwear!” Kiriko made Amane put on the sunglasses she'd been wearing, then roughly tugged Amane's ear, forcing her to face Seina.

“Hey, that hurts!”

“Shh! Someone'll notice. Get serious.”

“Seriously… Kiriko's the one who's been trying everything on properly. And stuff that's a little bit more daring than usual, too.” Amane lightly poked Kiriko's underwear with her index finger.

“Kyaa! W-well, I wear stuff like this sometimes too!”

Kiriko covered the vivid red underwear with both hands, shielding it from Amane's gaze. Her beautiful black hair and flawless white skin formed a figure that even Amane found mysteriously alluring.

“Dammit! I won't lose!”

“Hey, Amane?”

Amane headed for the fitting booth faster than Kiriko's hand could stop her. But Kiriko, seemingly more concerned about Seina, looked from Amane to where Seina was standing.

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About ten minutes later, the salesperson from earlier returned to Seina.

“Thank you for waiting.”

But Seina, engrossed in the video, didn't even notice her voice. The clerk didn't say anything further, just smiled and watched Seina.

“Did you like it?”

Only when the promotion ended did the clerk finally address Seina.

“Huh… Oh, sorry.”

“Now, please come this way.”

Seina stood as instructed and was led to an area behind the counter, enclosed by a partition resembling the lattice windows of a traditional Kyoto townhouse.

“You seemed to enjoy the video, Yamada Seina-sama.”

“Well, someone I know appeared… I was a bit surprised.”

“That video was originally a long version for in-store promotions that wasn't broadcast on internet TV. We don't distribute it, but if you liked it, please take it. We also have all the promotional and commercial footage featuring Amane-sama, so feel free to take those as well.”

“…Ah, thank you.” Seina hesitated slightly, but drawn by Amane's beauty and above all the video's excellent production quality, he decided to accept it.

“Now, please check your items.”

The clerk began taking each piece of lingerie out of the box and showing them to Seina.

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“I never imagined Seina-chan would come to a place like this alone.”

“He's a guy too, so it's not weird for him to be interested in underwear, right?” Amane, wearing bright sky blue underwear and sunglasses, came next to Kiriko and peeked at Seina.

“There's a difference between being interested and actually coming to buy the real thing!”

“If he ever wants underwear, I'd give him mine anytime.”

“Don't say stupid things!”

“If it were Gyokuren, she'd probably just strip down and hand it over right there, haha.”

That sort of thing was Gyokuren's specialty. Just imagining that scene had incredible destructive power. And that applied to women as well as men.

“Damn it!” Kiriko blushed and became speechless for a moment, but she shook her head and slapped her cheek to drive away her delusions.

“……It… it could be a gift for someone, right?!”

“Underwear?”

“Ugh!”

Amane's single word silenced Kiriko once more.

(Why… why?)

As if fleeing, Kiriko began analyzing why Seina would come to a place like this. She tried to stay as calm as possible, recalling Seina's actions since arriving at the Academy and scrutinizing his words and behavior. But no matter how hard she thought, she couldn't find any reason Seina would come to a place like this on his own.

“That's it! Before, Kai… my brother used Seina-chan's name for some suspicious mail-order business.”

“Could it be he's doing this for someone else? Well, that possibility isn't entirely out of the question…”

“That's the most likely explanation! Yes, that must be it!”

“Still, we can't see much from here.”

As Amane and Kiriko leaned forward, a woman dressed differently from the staff stood in their way, pushing them back into the fitting room.

“Please do not leave the room dressed like that, Amane-sama, Kiriko-sama.”

“Ah… no, sorry, Nanami.”

Coincidentally, Amane and Kiriko knew the owner of the store, Nanami, Amane through her modeling work and Kiriko through Minaho.

“I'm sorry, Nanami-san, but…”

“No buts. While no men enter these fitting rooms, there are still several customers in the store right now. Even if you have a taste for revealing clothing, please refrain from doing so in our store.”

“Hahaha… No, sorry about that. By the way, Nanami… Seina is buying underwear, right?”

“We don't carry any other products here.”

“Is that really Seina buying it? Could it be someone else's order?”

“I cannot discuss matters concerning customer privacy, even with Amane-sama.”

“Nanami-san, does Seina-chan… come here often?”

“We cannot discuss matters concerning customer privacy, even with Kiriko-sama.” Nanami replied in a businesslike manner.

“But as Seina-chan's guardians, we're responsible for him…”

“There is no age restriction for purchasing underwear.”

“But this is a women's-only store, right?!”

“Oh, Kiriko-sama. Quite a few gentlemen do shop here as well.” Nanami said something chillingly matter-of-factly to Kiriko and Amane.

“!!”

It's true that Kiriko spent a lot of time with Seina as a child, but by the time Seina started to develop a sexual interest in her, Kiriko was in space and only saw him occasionally.

Starting with Kiriko, Amane, Elma, Hakuren, Gyokuren, Karen, Suiren, and the occasionally intruding Airi, Seina had been living with many women since coming to the Academy. What's more, every single one of them was a celebrity or even more beautiful than that. He saw them in their underwear, sometimes even naked. It wouldn't be strange if Seina's hidden, or perhaps new, hobby had been established right there.

“N-No way…”

Kiriko had neither the confidence nor the certainty to deny it. Yet, clinging to the image of Seina from her childhood as her anchor, Kiriko declared, “No, no, no, no, Seina-chan doesn't have such a special hobby…!” Squeezing the words out from the depths of her heart.

“In short, I'm saying it's anyone's freedom to buy whatever underwear they like, Kiriko-sama.”

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“…And this one is…”

The clerk, seemingly enjoying Seina's flushed reaction, took her time showing each piece of lingerie while explaining it in detail. By the time the last item was described, Seina felt quite mentally exhausted. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he slumped back against the chair, completely drained.

The clerk, wearing a thoroughly satisfied expression, carefully packaged the items and transferred them to the location specified by NB.

“Now, we'll perform the biometric authentication seal. Please place your palm here.” The clerk pointed to a monitor floating above the table.

As Seina placed his hand there, the monitor vanished instantly.

“That completes the procedure. Thank you♡”

“Well, I'll be off then.”

“Oh, right! If you ever want to give a gift to someone, Yamada-sama, please feel free to consult us anytime.” The clerk said cheerfully, handing Seina a business card.

Seina took the card and fled the scene.

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“Hey, Kiriko! Seina's leaving!”

“Huh? No way!”

Nanami grabbed both of their hands firmly as they tried to rush out after Seina.

“Both of you, please change before going outside. Also, did you like the items you tried on?”

““Ah!””

Kiriko and Amane remembered they were in their underwear, flushed bright red, and dashed back into the fitting room. In less than ten seconds, they came out fully dressed.

“Nanami, we're keeping these underwear on! Send the ones we took off along with the bill.”

“Understood. Thank you for your patronage. Have a safe trip.”

After watching Amane and Kiriko disappear in an instant, Nanami picked up the discarded underwear and stared at it intently.

“Oh my, you two have both gone up a size… I'll need to update the data.”

“Owner!”

The clerk who had been assisting Seina earlier entered, skipping along with a beaming smile.

“Oh, thank you for your hard work. How was Yamada Seina-sama?”

“He was all flushed and adorable! Oh, I wish more young men would come shopping here…” The clerk wrapped her arms around herself and swayed her hips.

“You're such a handful. Honestly, with the way you were acting earlier, young men would be even more embarrassed to come in.”

“What?! Really? Hmm… I need to come up with a plan…”

“Just make sure it doesn't damage the shop's reputation, okay?”

“Ah, by the way, how were Amane-sama and Kiriko-sama?”

“It seems Yamada-sama was quite shocked to see this shop.”

Recalling the earlier scene, Nanami couldn't help but burst out laughing. “I suppose so… It's like catching your little brother masturbating.”

“That's a bit of a stretch as a metaphor… But wait, have you actually seen it?”

“Ahaha, I was the one who got caught.”

“What? Someone spied on you? Was it an accident?”

"No one was home, so we were doing it in the living room… hahaha!"

“…Oh, I see. Your brother must have felt really awkward, huh?”

“He made me sit seiza in just my underwear and gave me a real scolding. Ahahahaha~~~”

The clerk laughed shamelessly and cheerfully, while Nanami, on the other hand, blushed and wore a complicated expression.

“Then we'll combine the footage we shot here of the two of them with Yamada-sama's footage and send it to Seto-sama.”

“Got it!”

“Oh, and while we're at it, send Ringo-sama a copy too.” Nanami gave a mischievous smile and switched the fitting room's “Reserved” sign on.

The next place Seina went to was a building shaped like a baby.

“What is this place… a toy store?”

With fewer people around and feeling less pressure than at the lingerie shop, Seina just walked right into the store.

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“Hey! He went into that store!” Amane, who had followed Seina, turned to Kiriko in surprise.

“Is this a toy store? But if it is, it should be fine, right?”

“Alright then, Kiriko. I'm leaving Seina's surveillance to you.”

“Got it. Amane, you check the other exits to make sure Seina-chan doesn't come out from there.” Kiriko, who had just started to enter the store, turned around with a bright red face and dashed back to Amane.

“Wh-why didn't you tell me?! Aaaah… that place… that place is…”

“That's right. It's a toy store. An adult one, though.” Amane said with a grin as she stroked

Kiriko's head, who was flushed bright red and trembling.

“Fine, I'll concede underwear is okay! Looking at it, wearing it… maybe even giving it as a present to someone. But that place alone…”

“Yeah, seeing it, using it, giving it as a gift… all definitely problematic.”

“Aaaaaah, no way! No way! No way! Seina-chan would never…”

“Calm down… In a situation like this, it won't do for us to lose our heads, right? Stay cool. What we do next is what matters.”

“…Y-Yeah, you're right.” Kiriko took a deep breath.

“Like you mentioned earlier, there's also the possibility it's meant for someone else.”

“Right! That's right!” Kiriko, who had been breathing deeply, turned toward Amane with renewed energy and nodded repeatedly.

“But… if Seina is buying things to vent his desires in a place like this, shouldn't we at least think about it a little?”

“…Think about it?”

“Look, Seina's surrounded by women all the time, right? Of course, it's unavoidable for work, but it must be tough for a young man like him.”

“As long as Amane and Gyokuren refrain from their silly pranks, there shouldn't be a problem.”

“Hey, hey… Gyokuren is the kind of woman who gets you excited just by being nearby and coming into view. You don't seem to realize it, but Kiriko is like that too.”

“Is that a dig? I'm nothing like Gyokuren or Amane…”

“Gyokuren is in a league of her own, but honestly, the girls around Seina now—including Kiriko—hold their own against any celebrities or models I've seen before… Seriously.”

“That… isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?”

Amane wasn't the type to give compliments lightly. Hearing that directly from her, Kiriko looked embarrassed, but she didn't seem entirely displeased.

“People have boundaries for who they let get close—lovers, family, friends, right? In your case, you see Seina like a little brother, so you easily fit into the space that even Gyokuren herself hesitates to enter.”

“Huh?” Kiriko looked at Amane with a puzzled expression.

“See? You're not aware of it. Watching from the sidelines, it's clear Kiriko really stirs up Seina's male desires, you know?”

“Uh, are you kidding me?”

“It's not like you do it all the time… but things like skin touching, you wearing low-cut tops, your breath against him… Like the other day, after the bath, you were just wrapped in a towel and talking to him, right? We were all wondering if it was intentional or just your natural self.”

“~~~~~!!” Kiriko flushed bright red and clutched the signpost with both hands, flustered. The metal pole began to creak and bend.

“That was torture.”

“Wh-why didn't you warn me back then!?” Kiriko glared at Amane, tears welling up from embarrassment.

“Seina's reaction was just too funny♡”

“Listen!”

CRASH! With Kiriko's scream, the signpost was crushed in her fist and tilted. Fortunately, it caught on a tree and didn't fall over. Amane and Kiriko, oblivious to this minor disaster, continued their conversation.

“But if we tried to warn you clumsily, you would probably distance yourself from Seina more than necessary, and that would force us to do the same. Seina is so sensitive to your attitude that every time your reaction changes, he gets all flustered, wondering if he did something wrong.”

“I-I mean, if he were like Kai, it'd be easy… but Seina-chan is just… complicated.”

“Honestly, Kiriko's the more troublesome one. Seina himself doesn't have much psychological fluctuation, surprisingly. It's all because of your influence.”

For Kiriko, the meaning of Seina's existence shifted between that of a younger brother and that of a man.

“…I'm sorry.”

“Knowing someone for so long has its pros and cons. Whether it's work or private life, we're often together in a large group, so we need to give him some space somewhere. Well, we should keep excessive interference with Seina in check, but we do need protection to keep people like Airi-sama away.”

“I see… You're right. If that's the case, is it bad that I'm watching over him like this?” Kiriko frowned and looked toward the building.

“But when he buys things at that store, is he buying them for someone else? Or is he buying them for himself? And is it something he uses himself, or something he uses on others? We need to know that.”

“…But if it's for someone else, then who exactly is that person…?”

The two looked at each other suspiciously.

“It’s not for me… Could it be Amane?”

“If it were me, I wouldn't be here with Kiriko!”

“Ugh, you're right… Then who could it be…”

“The most likely candidate is Airi-sama.”

“Or Gyokuren…”

“But seeing Gyokuren lately, I just can't really connect that image with her anymore… Remember that scene in the cafeteria last night?”

“!!”

The intense emotion she felt then came flooding back, sending a shock through Kiriko that made her whole body break out in goosebumps. Her cheeks flushed, and gradually, her entire body grew hot.

“……Yeah, I guess… I don't want to admit it, but—”

“Well, if Seina wants to do it, I'd probably be happy to…”

“Seina-chan wouldn't say that himself!”

That was precisely the image Amane had described. And that was precisely why she was so bewildered by the reality before her.

“Anyway, imagining all sorts of things here won't get us anywhere. Looks like we'll just have to grab Seina, search his packages, and question him.”

“Right… Wait, no! Seina-chan!?” Kiriko spotted Seina's back as she turned the corner ahead.

While the two of them had been talking, Seina had come out of the toy store.

“Oh no!”

The two frantically started running after Seina.

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“What the hell does NB do normally? Is it really because of that ‘Top 100 Old Men’ software? What am I gonna do if Kiriko-san and the others see me here?” He muttered to himself as he headed toward his next destination.

“You're not going to go in there, are you?” A young GP patrol officer stopped Seina with a polite yet authoritative voice.

Seina quicly checked the map, but he was on the right path.

“Yes, I have some business there.”

“Hey, you… Really, developing such a hobby at your age…!” The officer, looking at Seina with disbelief, noticed the rank insignia on his uniform.

“Y-you’re a Captain?! I-I apologize!” The patrolman promptly stepped aside and saluted.

“As expected of the Captain! Quite the niche hobby you have. Please, go ahead.”

“Huh? Ah, thank you…”

Seina entered the alleyway and climbed the stairs of a multi-tenant building. Standing before a specific door, he double-checked that this was indeed his destination.

“He did say 'eccentric'… that patrol officer earlier.”

But the door had no sign, let alone a nameplate. He had absolutely no clue what kind of place it was.

“Guess I have no choice but to go in…”

Knock knock—— Finding no doorbell, Seina knocked lightly on the door. Suddenly, it swung open, revealing a man with a stern face.

“Um, excuse me…”

“This establishment is members-only. Were you referred by someone?”

“NB's…”

“Oh, NB-sensei. We've been expecting you. Please, this way.”

“NB… Sensei?”

As soon as he was practically pulled inside, the door slammed shut with a heavy thud. Simultaneously, the armored shutter in front of him opened. But it was a dead end, with walls only in front and to the sides. Suddenly, Seina felt a slight shock.

(Ah, a transfer.)

It was the characteristic vibration of cheap civilian-grade equipment. After experiencing that sensation several times, Seina emerged into a room resembling the waiting area of a cheap hotel.

“Please wait here.”

As Seina sat down on the sofa indicated by the intimidating man, a woman in a gown who had been watching from her chair approached and sat down beside him. She wore strange, tiger-like makeup, and though her features retained a childlike innocence, she was a

stunning beauty—almost startlingly so.

“Hey, that person isn't a customer.” The intimidating man said, seeing the woman sit next to Seina, made a gesture as if to shoo her away.

“Oh… that's too bad.”

At that moment, two women emerged from the back wearing tight bondage-style outfits.

"Hey, this is our first visitor. Help me greet him."

“Awww right. See ya, cutie pie.”

Giving Seina a light cheek-rubbing like a Wau person might do, the woman vanished into the transfer gate with the other two.

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“No… no…” Kiriko stared fixedly at the door Seina had entered, frozen in place as if paralyzed, muttering to herself.

“This one was unexpected… Underwear and toys could belong to someone else, but in a brothel, there's no chance it could be for someone else.” Amane looked troubled, but unlike Kiriko, she didn't have such a strong protective instinct, and she even seemed somewhat amused. “If that's the case. He looks so innocent, but he's gotten himself into some surprisingly deep shit.”

“It's a dream… This is all a bad dream…”

“Yes, this is a place to dream for a moment.” A woman's voice overlapped Kiriko's whisper.

“Who!?” Amane turned around quickly and saw three smiling women holding whips.

They were standing in a way that seemed to block the aisle, and a soft vibration could be heard from the whips they were holding. Then the woman wearing tiger-like makeup, who had been sitting next to Seina earlier, took a step forward.

“Oh, Amane?”

“Huh?” Peering suspiciously at the woman's face, Amane recoiled in shock. “…Gah! Could it be… Yumeno!”

“Bingo! Long time no see, Amane.” The woman called Yumeno threw herself at Amane and hugged her tightly.

“If she knows Yumeno-chan, then she really is the real Amane Kaunaq, right?”

The other two relaxed their guard and cut off the whip's energy.

“I'm so happy! You finally came to play. I've been waiting forever, but you never came.”

“No! I didn't come to play!”

“No way! I won't let you get away!”

Yumeno wasn't just clinging to Amane; she had Kiriko's hand firmly in her grasp too. The other two women quickly surrounded Amane and Kiriko, making sure they couldn't escape.

“If you're Yumeno-chan's friend, we'll have to give you extra special service.”

“Oh my, this lady here is quite the beauty too. A model, perhaps?”

“N-no, thank you, but I'm not into that sort of thing…” Kiriko backed away, turning her face away from the approaching woman.

“Hehehe, don't you both want to see a side of yourselves you've never seen before?”

“Exactly. Amane definitely has talent.”

And so, Yumeno and the others two grabbed Amane and Kiriko by the arms and dragged them along the hallway.

“Aaaah, I don't want to see it, and I don't have that kind of talent!”

“Hehe, I wonder if this one would look better with a whip?”

“Ah, that might be right. After all, she is the Demon Instructor.” Amane said with a carefree attitude.

“Amane! No, I don't have that kind of taste either~~!”

As Kiriko glared at Amane, the woman beside her happily threw her arms around her.

“Wow, you're the Demon Instructor?”

“How wonderful… I want you to push me really hard.”

Honestly, a threatening atmosphere would have made it easier for both Amane and Kiriko to fight back. But the women's oddly friendly vibe completely defused their hostility, and the two were dragged toward the transfer gate.

“Aaaahhhhh! Please, spare meeeeeee!”

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“Sorry to keep you waiting, customer. This is the data we need you to deliver to NB sensei. “

The intimidating man pointed at the jet-black, two-centimeter cube held in the palm of the woman who had accompanied him.

“Place your hand on top of the cube.”

Obediently, Seina placed his palm on the cube. Immediately, the cube began sinking into his palm.

“Whoa!?”

“Oh, is this the first time you've seen this? Don't worry, it's not inside your body, it spreads across your skin. It's nano-thin. That's why you can't see it.”

“Huh…”

He stared at his palm and arm, even touching them, but found absolutely no trace of anything cube-like having been there.

“All you need to do now is touch the key program, and it will reconstruct itself.”

As if to prove the man's words, the woman who had held the cube brought her palm close to Seina's. Instantly, the cube took shape.

“NB sensei has the key program, so just do as you did now.”

“I understand… But what about this data…”

Seina was curious about the contents of that data. After all, carrying around illegal items was problematic given his position.

“Ah, no need to worry. It's just personal hobby data. Even if it were discovered, it's not the kind of thing that would cause trouble for our client.”

Noticing Seina's expression, the intimidating-looking man said with a laugh. Then, the woman who had been holding out her palm smoothly intertwined her fingers with Seina's.

“Hey, why don't you stay and play too, customer?”

“Hey, hey. This one isn't that kind of customer. He's not just fixed in a juvenile state—he's the real deal, a minor.”

With that, the tough-looking man plucked the woman away as if she were a kitten.

“Ugh… Alright then, head out through that gate. The destination will be different than your arrival, so be careful.”

“Hehe, then come visit when you're grown up ♡”

“Hahaha…”

Seina confirmed the cube had vanished again, then stepped into the gate the tough-looking man had indicated.

“Ohhh… he's gone. He was a real young man, too! How mean of the manager!” The woman who had seen Seina off pouted as she spoke, glancing regretfully back at the transfer gate.

“Hah! That customer? Rumor has it he lives with top-tier beauties. You're not even close to being good enough for him!”

“That's cruel, manager!”

“Hahahaha, and besides… if he's with a woman like that, it's even more so.” The tough-looking man said as he activated a monitor.

“Hm? …Oh my oh my oh my.”

Peering at the monitor, the woman froze in shock. Before her eyes were the three colleagues who had been tied up after Kiriko struck back.

“Hmmmm. I'd almost want to scout this lady for our place.”

“Wow…♡ Hey, hey, can I join too?” The woman wriggled her body, her eyes sparkling.

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“Phew, finally done.”

After confirming every item on the list was checked off, Seina collapsed onto a bench in the small plaza.

“…Seriously… NB sensei? No joke, I should ask Elma-san to do a detailed memory scan next time.”

“Oh? What about me?”

“Huh?” Startled by the sudden voice, he looked up to find Elma staring at him.

“Ugh, what a nightmare…”

Kiriko and Amane staggered over to the bench that Seina had been sitting earlier and collapsed onto it.

“Man, I never knew Kiriko had that kind of skill. Your binding technique and whip handling were nothing short of masterful.”

“…It's… an application of GP's capture techniques.”

She made excuses, but judging by her skill, it was clear she'd actually done this several times before.

“What about the whip?”

“Well, a whip is essentially a weapon! ……It's just that I was taught how to use various weapons back in the day.”

“Ohhh… I see. As expected of the Demon Instructor. So you're popular not just with all those beefy guys, but with the curvy ladies too, huh?”

“Hey!”

“Those girls earlier, all of them, with glazed-over eyes, saying stuff like 'Aaaahhh, moreee'… As expected of Seto-sama, the successor candidate to Airi-sama. Her training is on another level.”

Of course, when Amane said successor, she meant the infamous part of their reputation.

“Who’s the successor candidate?! I'm getting angry!!”

“Well, Yumeno's right. I saw a side of Kiriko I didn't know existed.”

“Aaaaaaaaaah…” Kiriko turned bright red with embarrassment all the way to her ears, went limp, and buried her face in her hands.

“It's okay, it's okay! Just don't tell Seina… Oh, Seina!… And Elma?”

“Huh?”

Kiriko lifted her head and looked in the direction Amane was pointing. There, walking side by side in perfect harmony, were Seina and Elma.

“Hmm… I assumed Elma was like the rest of Airi’s secretary brigade—all decent people, starting with the chief secretary… but…” Amane stood with her arms crossed, stroking her chin with her right hand, looking like a seasoned detective glaring at a suspect while piecing together clues.

“No way… Elma's Seina-chan's partner?”

“First off, Airi-sama is not only a member of the Academy Council, but also the Academy's greatest intellect and connoisseur of the finest hobbies—a philosopher who embodies both the Academy's honor and its notoriety! And Elma is her private secretary! …I might have let my guard down a bit here.”

“Could it be that Airi-sama suddenly arriving last night…”

“It might be related to today's shopping. Underwear, suspicious toys, suspicious adult entertainment.”

“No way… not all three of them!”

“Hmph, I think I'm starting to see the core of this.” Amane grinned.

“If that's the case, then how should I apologize to Seina-chan's parents…”

“Hey, save the moping for later! We're gonna lose sight of them!”

Pulling Kiriko up from where she'd slumped, Amane forced her to her feet and gave chase after Seina and Elma.

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“I see, a first paycheck gift…”

“…I never imagined I'd run into Elma-san here of all places.”

“It's okay, I won't tell anyone else. Besides, not knowing what you bought means you can imagine what you'll get and enjoy the anticipation.”

“Hahaha… that's a lot of pressure…” Seina scratched his head in embarrassment.

Amane and Kiriko followed closely behind the two of them.

“Hey, Seina-kun. If you haven't decided where to shop yet, there's this hidden gem Airi-sama told me about before. What do you say?”

“Huh? A hidden gem? Well, I did spend last night searching online and have a few places in mind…”

“The really good spots aren't listed online, you know.”

“Got it. Then, I'll leave it to you.”

“Well then… Seina-kun, it's too far to walk, so let's use a transport gate!” Elma dragged Seina into the transport gate installed beside the street.

Immediately after, they were transported with a whoosh.

“Seina-chan!!”

“Elma, she noticed, huh? …Don't underestimate this first-class detective!”

“You’re a second-class detective!”

“Who cares about that now?! It's a matter of pride, pride! We need to figure out where they went!”

“Hold on a sec!”

Kiriko accessed the transfer gate management system and began pinpointing the

destination. But as expected of a bustling district, there were many transfer gates and many users. And it wasn't necessarily a one-time use.

“We'll just have to be patient.”

“Seina-kun, this way.”

After using several transfer gates, the final gate brought them out in a quiet residential area on the upper ring. Walking for a few minutes from there led them to a large park above the highway. Running to the end of the park's promenade, Elma veered off onto a side path and dashed toward the screen.

“Ah, there it is! Seina-kun, over there!” Elma leaned over the railing, pointing down below.

Seina ran up beside her and saw a large bazaar stretching along the center of the highway. Tents and stalls lined a long, narrow park about a hundred meters wide, filled with vehicles of all sizes.

“Wow, there's a place like this?”

“Let's go then.” Elma took Seina's hand and led him down the stairs beside the screen.

“If you want to find a real bargain, this is definitely the place. There's a lot of used and junk items, but you'll also find handmade goods from retired craftsmen, engineers, and ordinary people. Sometimes, you even come across things made as a hobby by craftsmen from top-tier manufacturers still in the game.”

“Wow, that's amazing.”

“Even professional buyers come here to source goods, so I'm sure you'll find what you're looking for, Seina-kun.”

“But with so many shops, it's hard to decide which one to go to, isn't it?”

“Well… We still have time.” Elma seemed to have made up her mind, pulling Seina toward a nearby variety store filled with stuffed animals.

Glancing sideways at Elma happily selecting dolls and trinkets, Seina picked up one stuffed animal from the colorful display and stared at it intently.

“A stuffed animal… Mitoto-san would definitely be happy with this, but… it feels a bit off for someone like Seto-sama. Or rather, she'd probably ask, 'What are you doing at the Academy?'”

Having known Kiriko for as long as he had, he knew her preferences and what she liked, so he was confident he could choose a safe stuffed animal.

“No, wait a minute. Before that…”

The stuffed animals here obviously weren't modeled after Earth animals. Some resembled the creatures he'd seen aboard Seto's ship or in footage since arriving here, but most were completely unrecognizable—he couldn't even guess what animal they were based on.

“I mean, what if I accidentally picked one of her least favorite animals… Huh?”

Suddenly, he noticed the stuffed animal in his hand had no visible seams. Even the more intricate shapes showed no signs of stitching whatsoever. It felt soft when squeezed and immediately sprang back to its original shape, and it even felt faintly warm.

“Wow, even something like this uses amazing technology, huh?”

“Did you find anything good?”

“Well, plushies might be a bit tricky…”

“Heh, maybe so. Well, let's move on then.”

“I was thinking about it while researching yesterday, but man, I really have no connection to this kind of thing at all.”

“You don't have to decide right away. Just look around first, then take your time to think it over and decide.” Elma said with a grin.

Clothes—shoes—accessories—tableware—cosmetics.

Amidst the mix of gems and duds, Elma confidently identified promising shops and went inside. Normally, with Seina's budget, he could only afford mass-produced standard items. But true to its reputation as a hidden gem, this place sold well-made handmade goods at bargain prices.

Elma chatted casually with the shop staff as if she were an old hand, gathering product information and intel on other stores before moving on. Thanks to this, he had everything he needed for the men, and a rough plan for the women's gifts was starting to take shape.

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“Ah!”

Seina stopped at a tented stall. To his surprise, it displayed items from Earth.

“Well, young man. Did you find anything you like?”

A girl wearing a large scarf wrapped around her head, oversized sunglasses, and an indigo-dyed happi coat called out to him while seated on a folding chair.

“Oh, this looks interesting,” Elma, who had been looking at the merchandise, picked something up and examined it.

“Hey, Seina-kun, wouldn't this be perfect for tea or liquor? It's just the right shape for

chilling in a wine cooler, don't you think?”

“Huh? …Wait, that one!” Seina blurted out involuntarily.

What Elma was holding with a cheerful smile was, unbelievably, a hospital urinal. It was a familiar, nostalgic sight for Seina, a regular at the hospital.

“No, Elma-san… that's…”

“Dahahahahahaha~~! Yeah, that's definitely a good use for it!” The girl let out a boisterous laugh, unbecoming of a child, and nodded vigorously.

Overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, “Is that so? Earth items are rare. Maybe I should buy it?” Elma said with a cheerful expression, uttering something chilling.

But Seina, hesitating to say outright what Elma was holding, desperately tried to find a way to gloss over it.

“Well, Elma-san…even though I say it's unusual, Kiriko-san and I are both Earthlings, and Amane-san and Airi-sama are very knowledgeable about Earth, so it's a little different from how it's used on Earth…”

“Oh, I see. Then I guess I should stop…”

“Hey, brother, don't get in the way of business.”

“You'd want to get in the way too, wouldn't you! By the way, that's brand new, right?” Seina whispered as he approachedg the girl who voiced her displeasure.

“Nope, used.”

“Then it's even worse! You want to drink tea out of that?”

“……Hehe♡” After a moment's thought, the girl flushed and flashed a surprisingly mature smile.

“Well… maybe it's still too soon for Seina-dono.”

“What do you mean… exactly? And why do you know my name?”

“She called you that earlier, didn't she? Besides, no one who deals in Earth goods doesn't know Seina-dono's name.”

“Ah… I see.”

“Hehehe, but cooling tea or wine inside it… Hmm, it might actually catch on.”

Her tone was that of a businessman, but what she was trying to make popular was a urinal, and the way it was used was extremely unacceptable to Earthlings, and even to Seina, who had been so kind to her.

“Please, don't make it popular.” Seina pleaded with the girl, rubbing his hands together.

“Eeeeeh?”

“I don't mean to interfere with your business, but using that for drinking purposes…”

“Well, I guess I have no choice… But I can't take responsibility for how the people who buy it use it, or what happens as a result, hehe.”

“As long as it's not deliberate or intentional. ……Hm?”

Seeing further persuasion was futile, Seina scanned the shop filled with that nostalgic scent and spotted a bell attached to the end of a small ribbon. Not that anything particularly caught her attention, but Seina pointed at it.

“Then, this one.”

“Thanks for shopping with us. Hmm, looks like you made a good purchase, young man.” The girl smiled brightly.

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“Oh, Seina-kun. And Elma too?”

A voice called out to Seina and Elma as they walked, searching for the next shop. Seina turned around to find Airi standing there, a huge, bulging backpack strapped to her back.

“Whoa! Airi-san!”

“What's with the 'Whoa'?”

“Ah, no, I mean, I never expected to run into you here… Oh, right, this place was recommended by Airi-san…”

“Airi-sama, are you shopping?”

Just as Airi was about to pester them, Elma spoke up from the side at the perfect moment.

“That's right. Just picking up some supplies for the shop.”

A long-necked bird-like creature poked its head out of Airi's backpack, glaring resentfully at them. And beyond that, several small chirps could be heard coming from inside the bag.

(There was a pet shop along the way… Could it be…?) Seina shook his head frantically, forcing himself to stop thinking about it.

“More importantly, what about you two? What's going on? You two seem so close…”

“No, no, it's not like that… I was just thinking of getting a present for a friend.”

“Oh? A present? So, did you ask Elma for advice?”

“Well, yeah… something like that.”

Suddenly activating the pamphlet monitor, Airi pointed at a necklace. “I'll take this one.”

“…Huh?”

“Well, I'll be waiting tonight. See ya.” With that, she effortlessly slung her backpack over her shoulder and skipped away.

“Hehehe, Seina-kun. When I said I'd give you advice, it obviously meant the gift recipient would be a woman, right?” Elma said to Seina, who was watching Airi leave with a puzzled look.

“Huh!?… I see.”

“But still, accessories might be the safest bet for a woman, huh?”

“Hmm… I guess you're right.”

“Exactly.”

Seina looked at Elma nodding, then at the brochure Airi had opened. But the necklace Airi pointed to was ridiculously expensive.

(Still, this is out of the question…)

Seina looked away from the brochure monitor and scanned the shops around that seemed to sell accessories.

“Ah!”

Noticing something, Seina grabbed Elma's hand and started running.

“!!”

Seeing her hand gripped firmly by Seina, Elma's cheeks flushed slightly.

“Elma-san, this way, this way!”

“H-hold on, Seina-kun!?”

Ahead of them, a stylish jewelry shop appeared—a large double-decker bus converted into a store.

“I saw it up online yesterday and it caught my attention. I didn't know it was in such a place.”

Seina and Elma went around the back and entered the thick, circular interior. Inside, many young men and women were peering into the display cases.

The interior seemed to be a converted camper van living room. Sofas were placed beneath

the display cases lining the circular walls.

“Wow, this for this price?” Elma gasped in admiration, peering into the display case.

The intricate craftsmanship and beautiful designs were stunning even to Seina, and surprisingly affordable. Now he was overwhelmed, unsure which piece to choose for whom.

“Wow, this is cute…”

What Elma was looking at was a bracelet made by linking together medallions carved with animals.

“Really… such intricate work.”

“I hardly ever buy accessories, but this one… Oh, no. I shouldn't be thinking about myself. I need to hurry and get Seina-kun's shopping done first.”

“No, this is incredibly helpful.”

Seina began thinking specifically about which accessories from the display case to give to whom.

“Heh heh…”

——Elma.

“!”

As Elma smiled, a man's voice suddenly reached her, accompanied by the peculiar discomfort characteristic of bio-comunication.

While this type of bio- comunication was difficult to intercept, it could only be used for short-range communication. Elma instinctively glanced around, but quickly stopped herself.

——A watcher, huh… What a bother. You think I'd betray you?

——Our role is to ensure your safe escape.

——You mean you're going to do it instead of me?

——It probably won't be that easy.

——Yeah… It might be a waste of effort.

——I'm praying it won't be.

——…….

——Just a word of caution, but don't forget that the longer you wait, the harder it'll be to escape.

Whether the watchers cut the transmission or simply distanced themselves, the sense of unease vanished abruptly.

“……”

“Elma-san, Elma-san…”

“…Huh?” Elma snapped back to reality and noticed Seina staring at her with concern.

“Are you okay? You haven't been eating much since last night… Aren't you tired?”

“Ah… Oh, I'm fine. There's just so much I want, I was trying to figure out my budget. Sorry for making you worry.”

“Is that so? Well then, how about we take a break somewhere? I can't decide what to buy either… Plus, I'm getting hungry.”

“Hmm… Yeah, let's do that.” Elma looked away from Seina's worried gaze and walked out of the store.

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“Damn you, Elma~~~!”

Amane and Kiriko pursued Seina and Elma, chasing through several teleport gates while searching for any small clues.

Kiriko gathered data, Amane narrowed it down with her intuition. Then they moved, searching for clues. Fortunately, white-haired Wau people were rare, so finding witnesses was relatively easy. But that was only possible because Kiriko and Amane's exceptional abilities allowed them to pinpoint the transfer gates with such precision.

“Back and forth, back and forth…how many stops did she make?”

“It would be easier if Seina-chan had NB with him…”

“Come to think of it, where did NB go? What about access?”

“I can't connect. Anyway, we've got the next candidate.”

Amane narrowed down the candidates Kiriko had presented. Choosing the most suspicious one, the two of them leapt into the transfer gate.

Seina and Elma bought some light snacks at the bazaar venue and made their way to a large park with tall trees, adjacent to a circular park about ten kilometers away.

It was a quiet place where neither the sound of cars on the highway nor the clamor of people could be heard. They sat down on a bench. Seina held his food, Elma her tea, and they gazed blankly at the scenery.

About thirty minutes later, after finishing his meal and taking a break with his drink, Seina quietly checked on Elma.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“…Yes, I'm fine.” Elma smiled, though she still seemed somewhat unnatural.

“Hey, Seina-kun. Don't worry about me. Go shopping.”

“But what about you, Elma-san?”

“Last night I was kept up by Airi-sama, heh, so now I'm just getting sleepy. I'll rest here. Besides, if you don't hurry, the things you want might sell out.”

“I-I see… Alright. I'll be off then.”

“…Go ahead.”

After tossing the snack case into the trash, Seina dashed toward the nearby teleport gate. Watching him go, Elma pulled a small pistol from her coat pocket and gazed at it sadly.

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“I see. Thank you.”

Amane and Kiriko had finally reached the gate where Seina and Elma had last emerged. They had also received a sighting report of Elma in a nearby park.

“I'm sure there's a famous bazaar going on up there, right?”

“Yeah, maybe… Anyway, let's go check it out.”

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When Seina returned, a considerable line had formed at that accessory shop. But the clientele was completely different from before—at first glance, they looked like wealthy people.

Those people were each sitting at tables with chairs like those at an outdoor cafe in a resort area, drinking tea under large parasols.

(The designs are different, so maybe they brought their own chairs and tables…)

“Excuse me, if you're here for that shop, the end of the line is over there.”

A man who appeared to be a butler among the waiting customers addressed Seina politely. But his masters clearly regarded Seina as out of place, shooting her mocking glances.

“Things seem quite different from when I arrived earlier…”

“That's because the owner of this shop has arrived.”

Following the butler's gaze, Seina saw an elderly man chatting amiably with a customer and a woman who appeared to be his secretary. By chance, the woman who seemed to be the secretary looked in Seina's direction and smiled.

“!”

Startled, Seina reflexively bowed to her, thanked the butler, and started to move back to the end of the line.

But then, “Please wait, Yamada Seina-sama!”

When Seina turned around at the sound of someone calling out to him from behind, he saw the elderly owner's secretary running towards him.

“You must be Yamada Seina-sama.”

“Y-yes. That's me.”

“Could it be you have business here?”

“Yes, I do, but…?”

“You were here a while ago, right? Please, come this way.”

“Huh? …But.”

Amidst the astonished, stunned, and piercing stares of the customers waiting outside, the woman practically forced Seina inside the shop.

“Oh my, is this your customer?”

The elderly owner smiled warmly at the secretary and Seina, and Seina returned a small bow.

“Yes. I'll leave the rest to you.”

The secretary bowed to the elderly owner and his customer, then led Seina deeper into the shop.

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“Please.”

The back of the shop seemed to be a compressed space, creating an unexpectedly large area—almost like a small exhibition hall—unthinkable for a large double-decker bus. Inside, glass-pillared cases displayed dazzlingly decorated accessories. These were far more intricately crafted and splendid pieces than the ones NB and Airi had extorted.

“If you'd like any of these, I can offer them at a price not much different from the items outside.” the woman smiled and said, perhaps noticing Seina's worried expression.

“No, no!”

To put it bluntly, there's no such thing as a free lunch. To get something this luxurious for such a low price, there must be some kind of hidden agenda.

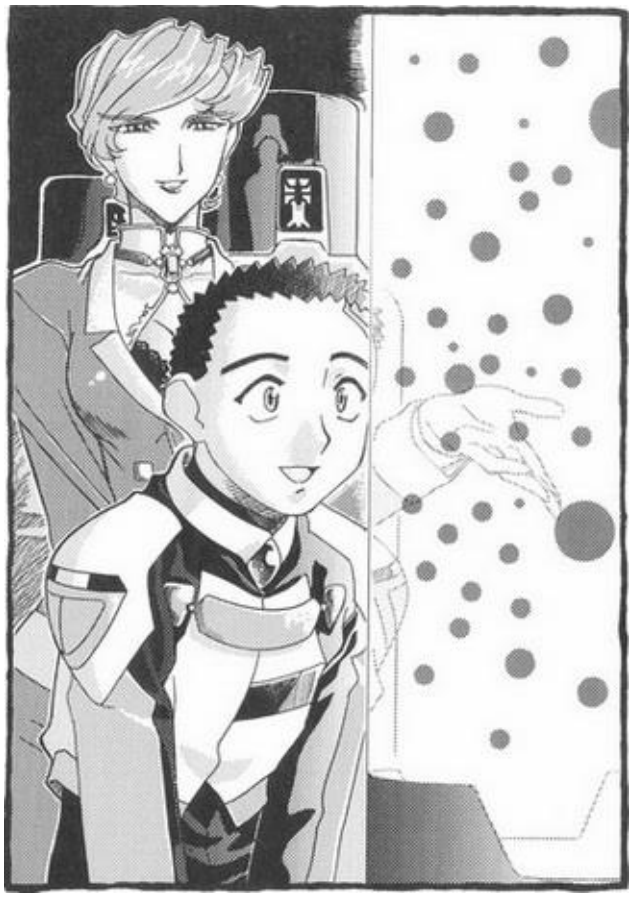
“My apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I am Tatsuki Koyuki. I am related to the Tatsuki family of Jurai, so please don’t worry.”

“I-is that so?”

“The items displayed here, as well as those in the store, are either pre-production prototypes, practice pieces, or items the artisans wanted to create that didn't quite hit the best-selling mark. The materials used are inexpensive, and all the gemstones are synthetic.” Koyuki explained the reason for the low prices, sensing Seina's unease.

“But it's so beautiful. The craftsmanship is so detailed and impressive… Ah, but I haven't seen many things like this before…”

“Hehe, the artisans who made them would be delighted to hear that. Ideally, we'd like to offer these pieces to someone who appreciates them like that… My apologies, I got a bit carried away. The reason I invited you here was to show you this particular item.”



Pointing to a tall bar stool, Koyuki stopped beside Seina. As Seina sat down, a large glass pillar descended from the ceiling.

“…Wow, it's beautiful.”

Inside the pillar floated spheres ranging from one to ten centimeters in size. They resembled a diverse array of marbles and glass beads, each bathed in light and emitting a soft glow like holographic film or opals.

“This is amber found only on Jurai.”

“Amber?”

“It's tree resin that solidified underground and became fossilized. When used for jewelry, amber is processed and polished just like other precious stones. But the pieces here are all naturally formed into these shapes.”

“Naturally…? I don't know much about amber, so I don't really know, but is it rare?”

“Yes. It requires a very specific combination of conditions to form. Most amber, while varying in shade, is primarily amber-colored. But pieces like these, with such diverse colors

and inclusions, are unique to Jurai, home to the largest known species of trees in the galaxy. Especially those that naturally form into spheres, and among those, perfect spheres, have traditionally been presented to the Jurai royal family and are called Imperial Gems."

"I-I see… But such a precious item, surely…"

"Please don't worry about the budget. Imperial Gems aren't for sale. Everything here is part of my private collection, so just the cost of the base parts, the processing fee, and the case will suffice."

"But is that really okay? Such a precious thing?"

Unable to grasp the reason for such generosity, Seina grew increasingly uneasy.

"While the quantity is too small for business, it's more than enough to offer to acquaintances. Perfect spheres are very rare, but I can part with hundreds of irregularly shaped ones. Of course, even the irregular ones are barely noticeable to the eye."

"Um, but even if you say acquaintances… we're meeting for the first time today, aren't we…?"

"My apologies. I've heard so much about you from Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama. Besides… if Seina-sama is giving these as gifts, then I'm probably among those you know too."

"Uh, right…"

Then, Seina looked at the Imperial Gems and realized something.

"Could it be that the customers waiting outside…"

"Yes, they're the ones who requested the Imperial Gems. Whenever the owner comes out, they always end up having long conversations before leaving."

In other words, people unaware that Koyuki was the true owner were desperately trying to befriend the old owner.

"Huh, I see…"

He recalled how the customers who had been giving him piercing stares earlier had suddenly lost interest and started ignoring him once they learned he was Koyuki's customer.

"Somehow, I feel a bit sorry for the people waiting outside… I mean, I'm not that keen myself."

"You're probably giving gifts to the people who helped you with your first paycheck, right?"

"H-how would you know that?"

"We get many customers like that this time of year. Half the customers who came in this morning were. And honestly, we prefer those kinds of customers. The reason we have a

shop at this bazaar isn't for the brand name, but purely so people who genuinely like the work will buy it.” Koyuki said, her expression clouding slightly.

Among the artisans this shop represented, many sold solely on their name. Some people come here to buy their hobby pieces, practice work, or prototypes cheaply, intending to use them as models to create expensive replicas with high-quality materials.

“Ah, I see.”

“That's precisely why I'd like Seina-sama to purchase these pieces.”

“I see… But wait, is it really safe to wear something that valuable after giving it as a gift?”

That concern was typical of the unlucky Seina. With wealthy-looking customers waiting outside, wearing something that rare could be dangerous. Especially if Seina was involved, it might even increase the risk.

“Don't worry, there are many replicas of Imperial Gems.”

“Really?”

“Yes, various manufacturers produce them. Heh, and they use such high-quality materials that they often cost far more than genuine Imperial Gems. Unless you examine them closely, the average person probably couldn't tell the difference at first glance. Of course, our genuine gems have nano-sized serial numbers and individual ledgers detailing each one's characteristics, but we don't disclose that information, so don't worry.”

“I see. That's good to know.”

“Then, Seina-sama, if it's not too much trouble, could you tell me who you plan to give them to? I can help determine their preferences and suitable colors.” Koyuki said and began accessing customer lists from various companies.

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“It seems certain they were shopping here.”

Kiriko and Amane moved along, asking around at various shops while scanning the area.

“Hey, you lovely young ladies over there, wanna buy something?” Kiriko heard a voice from the back of the store and turned pale when she saw who it was.

“Whoa, Washu…” Kiriko almost cried out, but seeing the girl press her index finger to her lips, she instantly covered her mouth.

“Are you looking for Yamada Seina-dono?”

“You know him!?” Kiriko approached the girl and asked in a low voice.

“Yeah, he was with that white-haired Wau girl. He showed up here a little over an hour ago,

but I just saw him walking alone a moment ago, so he should still be around here somewhere?”

“I see. Thank you.”

“Hey, Kiriko.” Amane called out to Kiriko, who was about to hurry on ahead.

“Hey, isn't this kinda nice?” Amane held up the urinal Elma had wanted earlier.

“What!?”

Just as Seina had often used it, Kiriko had also frequently used it to tend to Seina's needs.

“If we fill this with wine or something and chill it in the cooler, wouldn't it be perfect?”

“Don't be ridiculous! This is…”

“Hahahahaha~~! By the way, that thing isn't new—it's used!” The girl burst out laughing at Kiriko, who turned pale and panicked.

“Please don't sell things like that!”

“Whaaaaat!? But it's been properly washed and sterilized!”

“You want to drink alcohol out of that thing!?”

“Heh heh heh, same reaction as Seina-dono. Come to think of it, white-haired Wau-chan was trying to use it the same way as your friend.”

“Please, I beg you, don't sell that kind of thing.”

“That's actually waste from a nearby hospital, you know. Doesn't it make your heart race a little, thinking Seina-dono might have used it too?”

“No way! I don't have that kind of weird hobby!”

“Eeeeeh… The Masaki family sure is serious, huh? Both Tenchi-dono and Aeka-dono are like that. Couldn't you be a little more…”

“Amane, let's get going already!”

Ignoring the girl, Kiriko snatched the urinal from Amane, placed it back where it belonged, and practically dragged Amane out of the store.

“Huh? Hey, Kiriko!”

“Finding Seina-chan comes first! He's supposedly still around here!”

As Kiriko and Amane walked away, a young couple picked up the chamber pot. Actually, this couple had spotted Amane holding it earlier out of the corner of their eyes. Things people show interest in tend to look better than usual.

“Excuse me, we'll take this one.”

The woman in the couple happily lifted the urinal. Incidentally, their intended use for it was the same as Amane and Elma.

“Thanks a bunch~~~. Nyahahaha~~”

She wasn't being mean or malicious. She was simply curious about how people in this world would use an Earth object.

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“It looked like such an interesting thing…”

“Yeah, it really was an interesting thing, wasn't it?”

Kiriko quickened her pace, as if to distance herself from Amane, who was muttering complaints under her breath.

“I was planning to use it for dinner tonight, you know.”

“Yeah, Seina-chan and Airi-sama would've been surprised, wouldn't they?”

“What are you so angry about? …There! It's Seina!”

Kiriko saw Seina entering the transfer gate several hundred meters ahead, just as Amane pointed. She instinctively started to run, but there was no way she could make it in time. Kiriko began pinpointing the destination. Knowing which gate was used, locating the destination took only a moment.

“Let's go!”

Kiriko and Amane sprinted toward the transfer gate simultaneously. Reaching it seconds later, they issued their destination commands. But…

A piercing warning sound rang out, and the transfer failed.

“Why!?”

“It's no good! The destination gate is sealed!!”

“Then to the nearest gate!”

“That one's blocked too!”

“Then we'll run!”

Amane burst out of the gate and ran at full speed, with Kiriko quickly following behind.

Elma remained seated on the bench, staring coldly at the pistol in her hand. Suddenly, the small birds pecking at the scattered feed on the ground took flight all at once.

“!”

Still gripping the pistol, Elma thrust her right hand into her pocket.

“Sorry I'm late!” Seina, holding the case for valuables, ran toward Elma.

Elma stood up, her expression unchanged, as if to greet Seina.

“There were so many kinds, I got confused. Ahahaha”

“……”

“But the shopkeeper gave me some advice…”

“Seina-kun… that gift… who are you giving it to?”

“Huh? That… um…”

“Tell me… I'll… give it to them for you.” Elma slowly drew the gun from her pocket and aimed it at Seina.

“!!”

The moment he saw the gun's black, gleaming muzzle, Seina's body froze. He tried to say something, but no words came out. Only the sound of his teeth chattering could be heard.

“So, the trauma from that time still lingers, huh?” Elma's cold tone and eyes overlapped with Tarrant's face in a flashback.

“Ah… ah…”

He wanted to believe it was a joke, a dream. Ironically, however, Seina's experience told him the crisis before him was real. But the next instant, Seina's teeth-chattering abruptly stopped. Regardless of his will, his instincts rapidly calmed his agitation.

The reason for this was that only Elma and Seina were there. In other words, Seina was the only victim. During the Linamix incident, Mitoto and the crew had been present. There was the terror of them being injured or killed.

(But this time, it's only me…)

“You're not begging for your life or trying to run away, are you?” Elma sighed sadly as she watched Seina's excitement rapidly subside.

— As soon as you get something, you lose it…you're so used to it.

Elma recalled the moment she had seen Seina off at the dormitory after Miki's tragedy. Watching his retreating figure, she had sighed just as deeply as she did now.

—Seina-kun… is merely existing. He's living as a human being while missing something profoundly important.

The hole Elma felt within Seina was gradually filled by many encounters and interactions. But a person's essence didn't change… No, as long as Seina had a skewed probability, anything that tried to fill that hole would soon crumble away.

(Right now, I'm doing that.)

Elma, who wished to fill the gaping hole within Seina, was now widening the hole that had been filled just a little.

“If you had just been a regular GP squad member… none of this would have happened.” Elma said, almost moaning.

“If I were 'just' that, I wouldn't have made it to space, and I wouldn't have met Elma-san or any of the others.”

“But… at least I wouldn't have pointed a gun at you!”

“I'm sorry I made Elma-san do that. But I… I'm just unlucky…” Seina slowly lowered his head and said sadly.

He wasn't lamenting his own bad luck, but rather the trouble he caused others.

“…Seina-kun”

“Even for me… this was the place where I could live as myself.”
“Me too… living with you and the others was fun. If possible… I wanted things to stay like that forever…”
Large tears were falling from Ryoko's face.

“But I'm really glad I came here after all. There were sad things too, but I truly enjoyed it. I felt… truly alive. For me, just that alone…”

“You idiot!!” Elma couldn't hold back and shouted.

Then, in the next instant, something strange happened to Elma's body.

“You… you mustn't say things like that—” Elma's voice changed mid-sentence.

“…Huh? Ryoko-san??”

Right before Seina’s eyes, Elma transformed into Ryoko Balta.

“Me too… living with you and the others was fun. If possible… I want things to stay like that forever…” Large tears fell from Ryoko's eyes.

“Even for me… this was the place where I could live as myself.”

In her private quarters aboard her ship, Ryoko finally understood the meaning behind the tears she had shed while looking at the photos taken with Seina and the others.

“…But!” Ryoko gripped the pistol with both hands.

“But…”

If she didn't shoot Seina, Ryoko's crew and family would be in danger.

“But…”

The boy who yearned to fill the gaping hole within himself, craving a place where he could live as his true self.

“Why! Why won't you run away!” Ryoko shouted, confident that Seina would not run away.

Seina's gaze fixed on Ryoko was as empty as back then. To snatch away the happiness Seina had finally built up—however insignificant it might seem to others—and end his life in that same emptiness… What Ryoko felt then wasn't mere guilt, something so trivial. It was akin to a wailing cry.

———Ryoko Balta! Hurry!

The lifeless bio-feed from the watcher mercilessly announced that time was up.

“Damn it!”

Honestly, Ryoko had hoped to stall for time, hoping someone monitoring Seina would notice. But any further delay might be seen as betrayal, potentially leading to the execution of her crew and their families.

(That's it! …… But…… But……B ut, but, but, but, but, but,!!!)

The strength in Ryoko's hands holding the gun began to slip.

“…But I guess it's still no good.” Ryoko smiled sadly and chose the path that would keep both Seina and her crew safe.

“Ryoko-san!” Moving a little distance away from Seina, Ryoko pressed the gun she held to her own head.

———What are you doing!?

As expected, the watcher was also bewildered by Ryoko's actions.

“I'm sorry…”

Just as Ryoko was about to pull the trigger, a shrill siren sounded.

“Seina! We found you!” A voice shouted from a mini patrol car as it came barreling through the dust between Seina and Ryoko!

“A date with Elma? What kind of…”

Leaning out the window, Amane yelled at Seina. But from the opposite door, Kiriko, looking at Elma, gasped in surprise.

“You… Ryoko Balta?”

“Tch!” Ryoko instantly fired her pistol at Kiriko and Amane.

“Damn it!”

Just before that, Amane had moved her mini-patrol car to guard Seina while dodging the bullets, when a platoon of GP special forces burst out from a nearby gate and pointed their guns at Ryoko.

“Ryoko Balta! Surrender!”

Ignoring the captain's words, Ryoko activated her guardian and opened fire on the special forces.

“Watch out! She's got an S-Class guardian!”

Ryoko's guardian, supplied by Airi, forced the special forces to fight hard despite their numbers. But the end came abruptly.

Gyaaah! The instant Ryoko's guardian pierced through one soldier's guardian, it suddenly vanished, as if malfunctioning.

The trigger fingers of the squad members, whose objective was to secure Ryoko, froze in that instant. Yet they couldn't stop the energy rounds already fired.

Sizzle! —— The energy projectile, calibrated specifically against guardians, vaporized Ryoko's upper body in an instant.

“Don't look!” Kiriko clutched Seina's head, trying to shield him from the sight.

“…Ryoko-san” All Seina could make out was the thud of Ryoko's lower body falling.

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While the status quo was maintained and verification proceeded, Amane glared at Airi as they faced each other.

“What is this?”

Aware of Seina leaning against Kiriko in the background, looking dazed, Amane spoke in a low voice.

“For now, get in that. Kiriko-chan and Seina-kun too.”

Saying this, Airi walked toward the armored trailer that had descended behind them.

After entering the vehicle and sitting on the benches along both walls, Seina and the others watched as the bag containing Ryoko's body was carried in on a stretcher.

“Airi-sama!”

Kiriko was furious at the insensitivity of transporting the body alongside Seina, but Airi gave the order to depart without a word.

As the armored vehicle lifted off and began moving, Seina silently took a package from the shopping case.

“What's that?”

In response to Kiriko's question, Seina slowly opened his mouth.

“I received my first paycheck and wanted to thank the people who helped me…”

“So maybe that's why you went to that bazaar…”

“Elma-san told me that if I wanted to buy something, that place was the best.”

“I see… But…”

As Kiriko hesitated slightly, Seina took out another package.

“What's that one?”

“This one's for Elma-san, and this one's for Ryoko-san.” Seina said, staring intently at the two packages.

“Seina-chan…?”

“…Ryoko-san…after Seto-sama, she asked me if I wanted to join her team. She was the one who told me that she needed me. Of course, she told me that piracy was wrong…” Tears overflowed, choking Seina's words.

He took a deep breath and began again, “……Well… Kiriko-san told me before, right? That the recidivism rate after getting caught is low.”

“You mean pirates?”

“…Once I caught her, I was thinking of handing her over and asking her to stop being a pirate.”

“Seina-chan…”

“What am I even saying? …I don't really know.” Seina roughly wiped away his tears, slowly

stood up, and tried to place the two bundles on Ryoko's body, but—

Rustle, rustle. The body bag suddenly moved.

“Whaaaaa!!!”

“Kyaaaaaa!!!

Seina and the other two were so shocked that they nearly fainted and collapsed to the floor.

“What?! What? What, what is this?!” Amane yelled, pointing at the body bag that was moving around.

“Umm… actually…”

Airi watched the stunned Seina, Kiriko and Amane with a slightly awkward expression.

“Aah! Enough already! Get me out of here!” What came from inside the bag was NB's angry voice.

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

As the confused Seina, Kiriko and Amane watched, Airi removed the seal from the bag. Ryoko's lower body rose from within, its surface turning pearlescent as it transformed into a sphere.

“Whew… that was a close call… Tell those idiots to train harder, Airi! They came this close to hitting my core!”

“Huh? NB? Why you???” Seina leapt to his feet.

“When Kiriko-san and Amane rammed into Masters place with the stolen mini-patrol, Hakuren-san and Suiren-san, who were hidden by sub-space camouflage, secured Ryoko-san and I switched places with her.”

“Then what about Ryoko-san?”

“She's safe, of course.”

“That's good…” Seina breathed a sigh of relief at Airi's words.

“For now, could you explain what's going on?”

In stark contrast to Seina, Kiriko and Amane glared at Airi, their expressions twisted, ready to pounce at the slightest opening.

“Eeeeeh… Explain? Well…” Airi said in a cute voice as she took shelter a short distance away.

“First of all, when did Airi-sama know that Elma was Ryoko?”

“Well, obviously since the hiring process. We figured out the spy infiltration routes and

weeds into GP, and then we can leak information about our side.”

“So… you've been letting Elma run free all this time?”

Ahahahaha, well, that's how it is.”

Kiriko listened to Airi's words with a disgusted expression.

“Hey, Kiriko-chan. You know, back when this plan was first conceived, it was supposed to be Seina-kun who who was replaced by NB.”

“When you say 'originally,' do you mean when we started living together?”

“Yep♡”

“So if Elma had been given the order to execute him earlier, NB would have taken Seina-chan's place?”

“We weren't really worried about that, though. From the Da Ruma guild's perspective, Seina-kun wasn't someone they considered that important back then. They wouldn't use a spy they'd sent to the Academy Chairman's secretary for something like that. Besides, based on Ryoko Balta's principles, she wouldn't resort to something like assassination.”

“But earlier…”

“I guess Da Ruma finally got around to it. A probability bias like Seina-kun's is kind of occult. But this one was incredibly important from the start.”

“In other words, the guards were too strong to get close to Seina-chan. That's why Elma was assigned that role…”

“Probably someone forced it on her? If they were going to use Elma as a disposable pawn, it wouldn't be worth it unless it was someone like me or Seto-sama. Even as a spy, I liked Elma. Keeping her near Seina-kun, I thought she might be able to think things through.”

“So that's why you used Seina-chan?”

Even if NB acted as a substitute, it wasn’t guaranteed. In Seina's case, the probability of it not working out was high.

“So you weighed Seina-chan against Elma—no, Ryoko Balta? Is that the correct interpretation?” Kiriko glared at Airi with a displeased expression.

To Airi, this signified that Ryoko Balta held considerable importance, meaning Seina had essentially been used as a tool for that purpose.

“Oh? Are four ladies-in-waiting from Seto-sama not enough for you?”

“!! That…”

It was an extraordinary number of personnel for an escort. Kiriko reluctantly accepted that NB as a bodyguard was meant to handle emergencies only. But one more question remained in Kiriko's mind.

“What's the meaning behind being so fixated on Ryoko Balta?”

It was clear Seto held Seina in high regard, but having Hakuren and the other three serve as guards, even within the Academy's territory, was far too much. Moreover, disguising NB as Ryoko Balta and making it look like she died was unnatural. And where were Karen and Gyokuren?

“Ryoko Balta is popular with both pirates and the GP. Her joining our side would be hugely significant, wouldn't it?”

“……Even so…”

Amane cut in before Kiriko could finish.

“But seriously, how did you even get hold of Ryoko Balta's personal data?”

“Huh? Well, someone like me can create it from various reference footage.”

“I see. As expected from a philosopher.”

Neither Amane nor Kiriko missed the change in Airi's expression. At the very least, it was certain that Ryoko Balta's personal profile wasn't made by Airi.

“This is deeper than I thought,” Amane whispered, and Kiriko nodded slightly.

The two decided it was pointless to pursue Ryoko Balta any further at this point.

“Airi-san. What will happen to Ryoko-san now?”

“It's all up to her. But you already know what you want to happen, right, Seina-kun?” Airi quickly held out her hand.

“I…”

Seina hesitated for a moment, then handed the two packages he was holding to Airi. Airi carefully tucked them into the side pocket of her backpack.

“Oh, right. Speaking of Ryoko-chan, I heard there was a message from Seiryo-kun to Seina-kun via Komachi Kyō.”

“For me?”

“……'I won't lose to you!'“

“Huh? What does that mean?”

Behind Seina's puzzled expression, Kiriko and Amane immediately grasped the meaning,

pressing their temples in exasperation.

“Seems he joined the Da Ruma Guild. Seiryo-kun's father was also happy that he saved the ransom money…”

“What!?”

“…Looks like Amane was right after all.”

“Airi-sama, if I run into that idiot again, can I just sink him without warning?”

“Absolutely! Ahahahaha~~~”

“H-Hey, is this really a time to be laughing!?” As Seina said this, Airi sat down next to him, leaning against him.

“It's fine. Humans have freedom of choice in their careers, after all. Even if it's a stupid choice, we have to respect it. Don't worry! Even if he becomes a pirate, the Tennan Special Exception still applies, so go ahead and shoot him without hesitation.”

“Huh!?”

“More importantly, Seina-kun. I get one too, right? A gift from your first paycheck ♡”

“Huh… Well, of course. That… Kiriko-san and the others too.”

Avoiding Airi's gaze, Seina looked toward Kiriko and Amane.

“Y-You didn't have to go to all that trouble… But I'm happy…”

Amane interrupted with a puzzled look on her face, pushing Kiriko's face away, her cheeks flushed and her eyes lowered.

“Wait a minute! Surely that present isn't the one you bought before going to the bazaar?”

“Ahh!!” Kiriko remembered Seina's shopping trip and stood up.

“Huh? Before the bazaar… No way!?”

The carefully cultivated good atmosphere began to crumble like a landslide.

“Seina! What the hell were you doing in that place—underwear, adult toys, and all that suspicious stuff!?”

“No, that was all NB's…”

Faced with Amane's intense glare, Seina blurted out the truth. Anyway, since Amane and Kiriko had seen the scene, there was no way to keep it hidden.

“NB?”

“Y-you promised to keep it a secret, Master! You liar!”

“We agreed you'd keep the present a secret in exchange for me going shopping, right? I got the stuff! And I never heard it was such a weird place! I was so embarrassed!”

“NB… You…” Kiriko closed in with a stern expression.

“No, no! I was asked to do all that by someone else, you know, Airi-san!”

“Hey, you! That's cheating, you little brat!”

Kirche was operating NB right now.

“Airi-sama…”

In the blink of an eye, the real culprit was exposed, and Airi was cornered not against the quay wall, but against the wall at the back of the armored trailer.

“That's not true! I wasn't the only one who ordered those items!”

“You'll spill everything… every last detail, Airi-sama.” Kiriko's hand closed in on the fleeing Airi like the jaws of a beast.

“Kyaaaaa!!!”

Poor Airi, captured by Kiriko, was dragged from the armored trailer to the interrogation room inside the ship after landing on the GP vessel heading to GP headquarters, like prey seized by a carnivorous beast.

“Help me!!”

Airi screamed desperately, but even the elite special forces soldiers, intimidated by Kiriko's menacing expression, made no attempt to help her.

Chapter Six: Prologue: Part One - The Wall of Fools

——The day before Elma was to assassinate Seina.

“No luck, boss.”

Komachi's investigation showed no progress whatsoever. Almost nothing was turning up through all of Komachi's information networks.

“Damn it! That bastard Tarrant…”

“His defenses are tougher than expected. Tarrant's connections seem far more extensive than we anticipated.”

“I don't like this… Hm?”

At that moment, someone accessed Komachi's secret line.

“Who is it!?”

“No time to explain. It's a message from Huo Balta, who was captured by Tarrant.” It was a young woman's voice.

“Wh-what!?”

“Hold Tarrant up on The Big Da Ruma. That's all.”

“H-Hey!”

But without answering Komachi's question, the transmission cut out.

“What about tracing the signal?”

“No good. Either way, there's not enough time…”

“I see… What do you make of that call?”

“She mentioned something about Huo Balta…”

The moment the operator finished speaking, Komachi opened a direct line to Ryoko's first officer. Before the call had even finished ringing once, Ryoko's first officer answered the communication.

“Komachi-sama? Did you find anything?”

“Do you know the name Huo Balta?”

“What!?”

“Hurry. We'll talk later.”

From the first officers fleeting expression, Komachi confirmed the earlier transmission was genuine.

“But delaying Tarrant… what should we do?”

“Hmm… I suppose I'll put that idiot to use.”

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Seiryo sat cross-legged in meditation within his lavishly decorated cell.

“How are you doing?” Komachi spoke to him through Seiryo's nanomachines.

They had been exchanging information occasionally since that incident.

“I'm always in top form! Wahahahaha!!”

“…Have any abductions happened recently?”

Komachi's words faltered for a moment at Seiryo's high energy. Even though she'd gotten somewhat used to it, conversing with Seiryo still took mental effort.

“Yeah, a few times. It's infuriating. Can't you guys do something about it already?”

“Don't you have any interest in doing something about it? You're a GP officer, right?” Komachi's tone was slightly provocative.

“What!?”

“This place has its own rules, you see.”

“Hmph. So even pirates who live as they please find it restrictive when they join an organization, huh?”

“That's how it is.”

“That's fine. I was getting tired of sitting here quietly! There's a song in the stars somewhere that goes, 'Freedom doesn't come to you. So you have to go out and grab it yourself. One step a day, three steps in three days, three steps forward, five steps back!'“

“…Huh? But doesn't that mean you're not actually moving forward?”

“If the destination is behind us, it shouldn't matter, hahahahaha~~!!” With that, Seiryo leapt to his feet and charged straight for the door in front of him.

“Hey! Wait a minute! Our people will be there any second…”

But before Komachi could finish speaking…

“Ha ha ha! Seiryo Boom!”

BOOM!!!! The door blew apart with a thunderous roar. Then, an alarm began to sound.

“You idiot! Why did you do something that would trigger the alarms right away?!”

“Ha ha ha! Surprise attack! Surprise attack!”

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“I… I made a mistake in my personnel selection…” On the bridge of her own ship, Komachi clutched her head in despair.

“What the hell is that idiot thinking?! He's ruined our entire plan! Hey, hurry up and give him weapons! And get the others out of the brig…”

“Captain!”

“What is it? …Huh??”

Hearing the operator's voice, Komachi turned her attention back to the monitor and saw Seiryo burst into the monitoring room, beat up the guard, and turn off the alarm. Next, Seiryo took out a large number of weapons from a hidden locker and began destroying the monitoring system.

“…So he’s been thinking, huh. I'm kinda impressed.”

“Seems he’s not a complete idiot.”

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“Wahahahahaha!”

Seiryo rampaged as if venting all his pent-up frustration. He resembled a dog dancing with wild joy at the prospect of going for a walk.

“Wahaha! Wahahahahahahaha~~~~~~~!!”

“He's completely reckless… Still, Tarrant, hiding such heavy-duty weapons like that…”

“Ha ha ha! Being cautious and cunning just means you're a coward when you turn it around!”

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“Who… is he?”

Sitting on the sofa in Central Headquarters' conference room, Da Ruma watched the monitor displaying Seiryo, a faint smile playing on his lips. Across from him, slightly apart, stood Tarrant and his subordinate, their expressions tense.

“I hear he's the captain of the GP ship captured by Komachi Kyou.” One of the aides standing on either side of Da Ruma said.

“Hmm. A GP officer… Quite impressive.” Da Ruma leaned forward with interest.

“I'm pretty sure the person in charge of that place is Tarrant… aren’t you?”

At the other aide's words, Tarrant's fist clenched tightly and trembled.

“I-I apologize!” As Tarrant bowed his head, gritting his teeth to endure the humiliation, another blow struck.

“Wh-what is this!?”

The monitor the astonished aide was watching showed Seiryo entering Tarrant's secret room.

“Tarrant, what is this?”

“You bastard!”

At the aide's words, Tarrant instinctively drew his gun and fired at one of his subordinates. The subordinate, his head blown off, collapsed without even a chance to cry out.

“You! Here…”

“Oh? So you didn't know about that?” Da Ruma spoke with a smile, cutting off the aide's words.

“I swear!”

“But that doesn't change the fact that it's misconduct on the part of those in a supervisory position.”

“I understand.”

“Tarrant. Bring that man to me. Do not kill him.”

“Yes, sir!” Tarrant bowed deeply to Da Ruma, then quickly led the rest of his men out of the conference room.

“Damn you~~~!”

The moment he left the conference room, Tarrant vented his anger by punching a subordinate who remained behind. The subordinate's jaw shattered, forcing him to kneel on the floor. For that subordinate, however, it was far better than being shot on the spot.

“Tarrant-sama!”

After passing through the transfer gate and returning to his flagship to take command, Tarrant was met by an aide, who rushed over with a horrified expression.

“A rebellion has broken out at the research facility in orbit around the homeworld! Huo Balta and his men have stolen the thing and escaped!”

“What?!”

The urgency of the report caused Tarrant's expression to shift to one of panic.

“During their escape, the research block was destroyed by its self-destruct system, trapping the Phantom inside the block!”

The lieutenant's hands trembled as he reported the incident, fearing execution. But Tarrant didn't have the time. He wanted to rush to the scene immediately, but Da Ruma had ordered him to capture Seiryo. He couldn't leave the chaos in his own control block to his subordinates and launch Daidoros.

“I cannot leave this post. I entrust the situation over there to you, but execute the person in charge immediately!”

It was the least he could do to vent his frustration.

“Yes, sir!”

The second-in-command hurried to the transfer gate before Tarrant could change his mind.

“What's going on! Still no control?”

The station's research director, his face ashen, was yelling at his subordinates. This planet was home to Tarrant's private research laboratory, and Huo Balta and his research team were working at a research station in planetary orbit to eliminate an AI program with an Astral known as a Phantom. Huo had stolen an item stored in a separate building and was attempting to escape.

“It's no good! All escort ships remain under enemy control!”

During Huo's escape, an escort ship patrolling near the planet suddenly had its controls hijacked, destroying the ground base and space station defense systems.

“Enough! Sink all the ships, regardless of the crew!”

“Research Building 1 cannot avoid self-destruction! Self-destructing!”

Part of the space station displayed on the monitor was enveloped in light, and the next moment, the impact of a large piece of debris was felt in the central block where the supervisors were located, which had been separated for evacuation.

“Blocks 2 through 8 are entering the atmosphere!”

The explosion at the First Research Building knocked it off course, sending the massive block hurtling toward the planet below. However, high-powered artillery fire from the ground base detonated the research buildings one after another, causing them to change course.

“Confirmed destruction of all blocks. No direct hits on the base, but the shockwaves from the explosions, falling debris, and attacks from the remaining escort ships are delaying the pursuit fleet's launch!”

“Damn that Huo… What happened to the Phantom?”

“The cage was functioning normally until just before the explosion, and no movement was detected. It appears to have been destroyed in the explosion of the second building.”

“Fine. Ultimately, we succeeded in eliminating the Phantom. But of all people, for Huo to take that thing out with him…!” The research director clenched his teeth so hard his molars nearly shattered, waiting for the blast's effects to subside.

“Some pursuit vessels are now ready for launch!”

“Launch them immediately! Don't let them escape!”

“Roger!”

After issuing orders to the operator, the research director leaned back in his chair, exhaling deeply as the situation stabilized. Released from the tension, he finally noticed something.

“But… Wait a minute… How did Huo and the others escape? Even if they seized control here, it's impossible for them to control the ground base. Even if they were disciples of Hakubi Washu. And the fall of the other blocks… thinking about it, it's unnatural too… Could it be… the Phantom?!”

The research director snapped his head up and stared at the ground base.

“I see! That's how it is!”

At that moment, guards poured into the central control center.

“What's going on!?”

“It's Tarrant-sama's order! You'll take responsibility for this failure!”

“H-Hold on! They haven't completely escaped yet! And the Phantom…”

Just as the research director spoke those words, the guards raised their guns and opened fire simultaneously on the researchers and operators present.

Their screams and shouts were instantly drowned out by the gunfire and the sound of destruction.

“Alright, blow this place up and we'll pursue Huo! Hurry!”

After the guards left, the lead researcher's hand twitched slightly as he slumped in his chair. With his eyes closing, barely able to breathe, he looked at the small monitor that had survived the gunfire and destruction, showing the ground base.

“…There… The Phantom is… there…”

As soon as he finished speaking, the central control center was enveloped in white light.

On the dimly lit bridge of the Mikagami, a single female operator, Minaho, and Seto watched the monitor floating in the center of the bridge.

“Protection of Huo Balta confirmed.”

At the operator's report, Minaho breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Seto.

“Seto-sama, we have now confirmed that everyone is protected.”

“Hehe, he'd be surprised to know who helped him.”

“…But it's unfortunate that the escape ship was sunk.”

The ship Huo used to escape was missing some coordinate data and was only capable of hyperspace jumps to certain locations. This was to prevent the location of Tarrant’s base from being identified, and all information needed to identify the base's location was restricted, not only from Huo himself but even from Tarrant's subordinates at the base. All ships that arrived at the base could only move within its visual field, and were controlled by unique coordinates centered on the base.

“Who would have thought the escape ship's coordinate data memory would be installed in the outer hull? And that the data ROM containing the coordinates would automatically self-destruct after the jump? What a thorough job of concealing information. Though, that's precisely how they managed to keep it hidden all this time.”

Huo Balta's escape ship was attacked by a pirate ship that had been waiting for them after the jump, but because the coordinates for the inter-location jump from Tarrant’s Base were randomly selected from among several dozen options, the enemy had to disperse. As a result, they managed to switch to a random jump, and although the escape ship was destroyed, Huo and his people managed to escape. While evading their pursuers by scattering and using civilian scheduled routes, they were rescued by Seto's people.

“Based on Huo's data, we were able to narrow down the potential area for the Tarrant base from approximately 300,000 to 80,000.”

“That's significant progress.” Seto replied with a wry smile to the operator's report.

“Still, it's a shame we couldn't recover that.”

In stark contrast to Seto's expression, Minaho stared at the monitor with a pained expression.

“It can't be helped. He couldn't have escaped with that cargo, after all. But Minaho-chan. Look on the bright side. After twenty thousand years, we learned of that child's existence, recovered by Tarrant. And now, seized from the enemy's grasp—though we don't know the route yet—there's a chance it might return to Jurai.”

“Still, using civilian delivery services…”

“Probably cash on delivery, I suppose.” Seto said nonchalantly to the bewildered Minaho.

“Seto-sama!”

“Given what it is, I doubt it'll arrive smoothly. And if it did, we couldn't just pay the courier the standard fee and say 'There, that's it,' right? But then Ringo-chan would definitely complain… Wait, come to think of it, given what it is, maybe the finance department would cover the expenses…”

“What the heck are you fretting about?!”

“Well, just the other day, Airi-chan messed up and got scolded by Kiriko-chan…” Like a child

scolded by her parents, Seto pouted and narrowed her eyes.

“It's because she made Seina-kun buy things like that! Besides, I got scolded by Kiriko-chan too, telling me to 'discipline her properly'!”

“Hmph! If Ringo-chan starts complaining too, it'll be just too sad.”

Seto stroked her earrings as if to calm herself. Seeing this, Minaho's expression softened.

“Hehe, you're already wearing them, aren't you?”

“Hm? Oh, these earrings? Well, I never imagined Seina-dono would give me something like this. So you made yours into a brooch, Minaho-chan?”

On Minaho's chest, an Imperial Gem stone shone, set in a Jurai-style engraved mount.

“Eh? Hehehe…”

Just knowing it was a gift from Seina's first month's salary made her feel a tingly kind of happiness, but to be given an Imperial Gem, something even few royals possessed… Minaho didn't know how to express that joy, so she simply laughed like a small child, perfectly sincere. And Seto, likely thinking the same thing, wore a dreamy smile.

“Hehehe… Well then, shall we take a short break? What's the situation?” Seto called out to the operator.

“Yes. Neeju Na Melmas-sama arrives in eight hours. We just received word that Ryo-Ohki-chan will deliver the new ship.”

“Oh, so this is her first errand, is it? Naturally, someone will be assigned to monitor her, right?”

“Yes, Noike-sama.”

“I see. So now we just wait for the main character to make their entrance, then?”

“The final test for Kamidake will be completed in three days. Right about now…” Minaho checked the space sector where Kamidake's tests were scheduled.

“!! No way…”

Minaho and Seto looked at each other simultaneously. The Kamidake test sector lay directly along the line connecting the sector where Huo Balta was being protected and the Jurai sector.

“No way, not even Seina-kun… Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Hohohohoho, you're overthinking it.”

The two laughed together as if to dispel their unease.

“…If anything happens, please contact me.” Seto stood up, looking exhausted, and entered the transfer gate leading to Mikagami's residential district.

Transporting to her house in the residential district, Seto shed her clothes haphazardly and dove out the window into the lake.

“Yay!” Splashing water, Seto's figure vanished beneath the surface.

“Phew! Ahahahahahaha~~~~~ Ha, ha……”

After about ten minutes, Seto surfaced, floating on her back with a look of pure delight, laughing heartily. Playing with the earrings Seina had given her, she gazed for a while at the giant trees towering skyward before swimming back toward the house at high speed.

Having finished bathing, Seto, still dripping wet, threw on a nightgown and entered the hall of mirrors.

Mirror Seto—Seto.

“Haha… That's so mean. I'm the only one who got scolded.”

—But you got something in return, didn't you?

“Yes, my treasure.”

—Pure… yet cruel…

“More than that… I'm happy.”

—I'm glad for you.

“Yeah…”

—Hehe.

“Hehehehe.”

Chapter Seven: Prologue: Part Two - Run, Run Away

The refurbished Kamidake was navigating through space for testing.

“Well then, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“Acknowledged, Captain!”

Alan saluted at attention. They had returned having mastered the bearing of fine soldiers. However, perhaps because Ryan had trained them so harshly, their eyes were expressionless, and even when they slept, they were at attention as they lay on their backs.

Seina secured his seat in the block below and headed for the mess hall where everyone usually gathered.

Kiriko and the others enjoyed reading or conversation, yet each of them caressed the Imperial Gem they wore as earrings, necklaces, or bracelets with tender care, or gazed mesmerized by its brilliance.

“Ah, Captain. Good work today.”

At Kiriko's voice, everyone stood and saluted.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Sure, I'd love some.”

As Seina sat down in a chair, Amane and the others gathered around him. Seina could see the Imperial Gems each of them wore.

“I'm glad you like them.”

“Me too. I used my first paycheck after joining the GP to buy gifts for Dad and Mom. Well, me and Dad… you know how it is… so it was kind of like a little declaration of independence. But then Mom told me the other day that Dad always wears the thing I gave him. Honestly, I didn't really get what was so great about it. But now that I'm on the receiving end, I'm kind of surprised at how happy it makes me.”

Hearing Amane's words, Seina looked down, flustered.

“Here you go, Captain.” Kiriko placed a cup of tea in front of Seina and sat down across from him.

“Even a regular gift would make me happy, but to actually receive an Imperial Gem… The only real one I've ever seen was Seto-sama's earring.”

“Doesn't the Empress Masaki have one?”

“Of course she does, but I've never seen one properly up close. To see them this close, and in such vast numbers, is absolutely unthinkable.”

It felt like seeing coelacanths lined up like tuna at Tsukiji Market. They almost couldn't believe it was real.

“I… got to see about two hundred of them. Perfect spheres.”

“It's an amount that would make anyone faint if they heard it. Even Mitoto-sama's son, Misao-chan, was more shocked than she was, contacting us to ask, 'Are you sure this is okay?'”

Kiriko was one of the happiest recipients of Seina's first month's salary gift. Yet she was certain Ringo had interceded behind the scenes for Seina to receive the Imperial Gems. It felt like a small act of payback for when she'd packed Ringo into a box and sent her back before—a complicated feeling.

“But what I really don't get is… why give an Imperial Gem to NB too?”

Amane and the others looked puzzled at NB, who had the Imperial Gem embedded in his body.

“I'm the one who looks after him the most, so it's only natural, right?” NB's voice was filled with joy and excitement.

“Seina, wait—does the Captain see NB as female?”

“No, it's not about male or female… When Koyuki-san asked me if I wanted one too, there was this one that looked just like NB, so I just…”

“Ah, so that's it? I thought they looked alike!”

Amane burst out laughing at NB's Imperial Gem. It had the exact same coloration as NB, looking just like a miniature version of him. Not only Amane, but Kiriko and the others started laughing too.

“Stop laughing! …Though, you're right, this really doesn't stand out.” NB changed surface color. The Imperial Gem changed color along with it.

“Oh, it's quite beautiful, isn't it?” Gyokuren remarked with admiration.

“Really?” NB continued changing its surface color repeatedly, and each time, NB's Imperial Gem changed colors like a rainbow.

“Come to think of it, Koyuki-san mentioned that NB’s Imperial Gem looks like a simple color, but its internal molecular structure is complex. Depending on the angle and type of light, it changes in quite interesting ways.”

“Huh, Imperial Gems really do have all sorts of patterns, don't they? It definitely feels like something only Jurai could produce.”

Just then, a level 1 alert sounded throughout the cafeteria.

“Captain, we've picked up a distress signal!”

Upon hearing Alan's report, Seina and the bridge operators headed upstairs, while those on standby remained in the mess hall awaiting orders.

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A battered escape pod, damaged by the explosion during the escape, was stored in the small shuttle bay located in the forward section of Kamidake.

The cockpit hatch was warped, taking some time to open, but fortunately, the robustly constructed interior showed no damage, and the crew member inside was unharmed. The man, administered life-support activators, regained consciousness while being carried on a stretcher.

“Ugh… W-where…?”

“This is the GP-affiliated vessel Kamidake. I am Yamada Seina, captain of this ship.”

“A GP ship!” The man broke the seal on a small box integrated into his suit and handed it to Seina with trembling hands.

“They're after this box!”

“Please don't talk!”

Ignoring Karen's warning, the man leaned forward, grabbing Seina's arm with his other hand.

“Hurry… they're coming. This… get it to Seto-sama as quickly as possible…”

“Seto-sama!?”

As Seina took the box, the man collapsed onto the stretcher as if released.

“Get him to the infirmary!”

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After seeing the man carried into the infirmary, Seina returned to the bridge.

“Don't worry. He's weak, but his life isn't in danger.” Kiriko said gently to Seina, who was looking worriedly at the man inside the medical capsule displayed on the monitor.

“I see… That's good.”

As Seina took his seat at the captain's console, Amane approached alongside Kiriko.

“Hakuren, did you figure out what's in the small box?”

At the operator console, besides Alan, Hakuren and Suiren were gathering various pieces of

information.

“It's sealed with maximum-grade armor plating, so I can't tell what's inside… The receipt is also written in code, so I can't read it.”

“At any rate, the recipient is definitely Seto-sama of Jurai.”

“The escape pod belongs to a private transport company, serial number 5002337… Oh no!” Suddenly, Suiren shouted.

“The ship registry database is being monitored!”

“Could it be the guys after this box!?”

Amane and Kiriko swiftly took their positions, transitioning Kamidake into combat readiness.

“Captain! Declare Alert Level 3!”

“Transition to Alert Level 3! Prepare for hyperspace jump!” As Seina spoke, alarms blared throughout the ship and bulkheads began sealing shut one after another.

“So, what are we doing about that little box, Captain?”

“What do you mean… well, I was asked to deliver it. Yeah! Let's deliver it!” Seina hesitated slightly, but quickly made up his mind and declared.

“That's the spirit! As a GP Delivery Service courier, we gotta deliver what we're asked to carry.”

“Here's hoping that package is collect on delivery.”

As Amane and Kiriko exchanged lighthearted banter,

“High-output reactions detected ahead, multiple!” Alan shouted.

“They're here!”

“120 seconds until jump!”

Pirate ships jumped out one after another right before their eyes, immediately locking onto Kamidake and launching their attacks.

“What the hell!? There are too many of them!”

Even with prior warnings, the attacks came from far too close to handle them all, and Kamidake took several direct hits.

“Five direct hits! But no damage to external armor!”

“No damage from direct hits? What the hell is that?!”

A sticky substance, resembling paint, clung thickly to Kamidake's hull. Everyone on the bridge found it suspicious, but in the midst of combat, and transitioning into hyperspace jump, there was neither the opportunity nor the time to collect and analyze it.

Dodging the pirates' fierce assault with its high maneuverability and Kiriko's skill, Kamidake broke free from the pirate ships' encirclement.

“Obstacle cleared! Hyperspace jump, loading complete!”

“Hyperspace jump!”

With Seina's command, the Kamidake vanished into hyperspace.

“Damn! They reacted fast. Just as rumored.”

On the pirate ship's bridge, Captain Gazura grimaced in frustration. The pirate fleet Gazura commanded was the cream of the crop within the Da Ruma Guild.

“It seems they saw through our surveillance. Otherwise, they couldn't have dodged our surprise attack like that.”

“High-performance ships and skilled hands… This might prove a bit troublesome.”

“Just to be safe, firing that thing from the start was the right call.”

“Alright… The hunt begins.” Gazura stared at the space where Kamidake had vanished and grinned.

【Tenchi Muyo! GXP Volume 6: The End】

Afterword

Dear [Recipient Name],

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Afterword Theater Part 3

“Ow ow ow… Huh?”

Kai noticed his mother, still clutching the receiver, sitting in embarrassed silence while holding his head where he'd been hit with a heel drop.

“…Hey mom, you sound like two innocent middle schoolers.”

“!! Wh-what are you saying, you brat!?”

“Lately, you've been acting strangely youthful, and when you talk about Seina, you seem uncharacteristically giddy…” Kai stared intently at Tsukiko.

“Sure, Mom, you're single and free to date whoever you want, but I don't want to call Seina 'Dad'.”

“Kai…”

“My… my dad is the only one for me…” Kai looked down, his voice sad.

Tsukiko stared intently at him.

“Kai… So? How much do you think Dai would pay for saying something like that?”

“Gikuuuuuuu!!” Kai screamed an unspoken, heartfelt sound effect.

It was like confessing Tsukiko's guess was right.

“Well then, I suppose you won't need this month's allowance, Kai.”

“Waaah, I'm sorry, Mother! Please let me say it. Please, let me call Seina Father. So just the allowance…”

For Kai, a month's allowance was more important than the fact his mother might marry his classmate.

“Hey, Kai! That's not what we agreed on!”

Hiding behind the sliding door on the veranda, Kai's father, Dai, burst in crying as he

overheard Tsukiko and Kai talking.

“Dad is trying to bargain down the fee, that's why it's no good~~~!!”

“My allowance got cut too!”

“Stop relying on your parents for pocket money forever, it's pathetic!”

“You'd want it too if you could get it!”

Kai and Dai started bickering like elementary school kids.

SMACK! THUD! Tsukiko's brilliant combo of kicks landed squarely on Kai and Dai, sending them flying out into the garden. She then closed the shoji screen, sat back down at the phone, and picked up the receiver.

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“Sorry to keep you waiting. Now we can talk quietly.” Tsukiko smiled happily.

“You two… seem the same as always.”

Seina was flustered by Kai's father’s remark. Even knowing Kai was joking, if he thought of Tsukiko not as his friend's mother but as a woman, she was definitely within his strike zone. Or rather, As Kiriko grew up, Tsukiko and Kiriko's images converged, and Tsukiko ended up in his strike zone. That was the truth.

“I'm just so tired of this by now.” Tsukiko frowned as usual, pressing her hand to her temple.

“Haha…”

When Seina was a child, watching Tsukiko and Dai fight was painful, but as he grew up, he realized that for Tsukiko, Dai was like a child who would never truly become independent. Interestingly, it was very similar to the relationship between Kiriko and Kai.

“That's right! Hey, Seina-chan. Soon, Kai will soon learn his true origins. When that time comes, would you like to participate in the ceremony too?”

“The ceremony?”

“If you have any good ideas to surprise him, why not give them a try?”

“Hahaha, I'll think about it.”

“Hehe, and then…” Tsukiko suddenly grew serious—though of course, since Tsukiko herself couldn't see the video, she was imagining the camera angle—and stared intently at Seina.

“Once the ceremony is over, Kai will become independent too… So once that happens, I was thinking of going back to the Academy to study again. What do you think?”

“To study again?”

“Yes, I'm on leave from the Academy, so I can return to school as soon as I want.” Tsukiko fidgeted, as if expecting something.

“Oh really? That's a good idea.”

“Really? Thank you, Seina-chan.” Tsukiko seemed relieved and smiled happily.

“Seina-chan, dinner's ready. Please come down.” Kiriko's voice came through the door intercom.

“Oh, gotta go. Aunt Tsukiko, I'll call you again.”

“Yes, take care.”

“Yes.”

After a brief farewell exchange with Tsukiko, Seina ended the call.

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“Hehe.” Sounds good to me.”… Huh. Once I get over there, I'll just move in with Seina-chan too ♡” Tsukiko muttered with a big smile.

The End

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I always work on my novels little by little alongside my main job, but this year, my main job was incredibly busy until well past the midpoint, leaving me absolutely no time to touch my novels. However, thanks to that, a new world called “The Tale of the Holy Knights in Another World” was born. I'd be very happy if you could watch this one on DVD or Blu-ray if you get the chance.

Now, the next volume will finally feature Neeju Na Melmas and Fuku-chan. Lots will happen. Separation, reunion, revenge, debauchery… So, see you in the next volume.

Masaki Kajishima